



RELEASE THAT WITCH

BOOK 05

Er Mu

EPUB CREATION BY LISA HAYES

Release That Witch

(放开那个女巫)

by

Er Mu

(二目)

Synopsis

Cheng Yan transmigrated only to end up in a medieval Europe like world, becoming Roland, a Royal Prince. But this world doesn't seem to be the same as his former world, despite some similarities. Witches are real and they actually can use magic?

Follow Roland's battle for the throne against his siblings. Will he be able to win, even though the king already declared him to be a hopeless case and with the worst starting situation? With his knowledge of modern technologies and the help of the witches, who are known as devils' servants and are hunted by the the Holy Church, he might have a fighting chance.

Now, let his journey begin.

Copyright

All rights reserved.

English Translation by Roxerer @ [Volare Novels](#)

Translation Edits by Disco Pangolin and KitKat @ [Volare Novels](#)

ePub conversion by Lisa Hayes @ [Hasseno Blog](#)

This is a free eBook. You are free to give it away (in unmodified form) to whomever you wish.

No part of this eBook may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the author.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Chapter 401: Winter In The Fjords

In the sea of the Fjords lies Sleeping Island.

The skyline turned a pale yellow as the last of the highrise buildings was finally completed. Although the setting sun was not visible, one could still see a streak of golden light reflected on the sea's surface by the sunset glow that passed through the clouds. Only the harsh cold gusts of wind, which blew directly at one's face, gave away the fact that it was no longer autumn.

"And it's done." Lotus lifted up the scarf around her neck until her ears were also covered by the soft cotton. "This will be our new home once the furniture and beds are moved in."

"Fantastic!" Durat Kimshoe clapped and said. "That's a lot of houses built in half a month. And I thought Lady Tilly was exaggerating."

"Lady Tilly doesn't lie," Breeze added.

"Indeed," Durat stroked his thick double chin and said. "If that's the case, I'm reassured about resettling my citizens over here. Oh, what's this?"

The merchant who came from the Crescent Moon Bay analyzed the groove-shaped parapet that was in the house. Bending his body, he even stuck his head in the hole to take a look inside.

"This is a warming device that I learnt about in the Western Region. It's called a heated brick bed." Lotus explained. "It's connected to the kitchen, and hence when a fire is started in the kitchen, this bed will also turn warm. "Add a wooden plank on top and cover it with linen or straw, and you can use it as a bench or a bed. It'll be more comfortable than your typical furniture, especially in the current season."

"Interesting design," Durat said and glanced squarely at Lotus. "If I wanted to hire you for the long term, how many gold royals would it cost?"

"What... do you mean?" Lotus was slightly astonished.

"Follow me to work in the Crescent Moon Bay. There remain several wastelands which have yet to be developed in my territory. Your abilities will prove extremely useful." Durat rubbed his hands and said. "How many gold royals do I have to pay the 'Sleeping Spell' in order for Lady Tilly to authorize you to follow me?"

"Sorry, I've never thought of leaving..."

"Your life over there will be much better than it is here," Durat interrupted quickly. "You'll get to live in the same large compound as me, enjoy fine wine and cuisine from the Four Kingdoms every day, and have attendants accompanying you wherever you go. That's the ideal life that many people envision, and I'm giving it to you as long as you work for me. Besides, Lady Tilly has said that the requests of the 'Sleeping Spell' must be fulfilled, and I'm able to afford your recruitment fees no matter how high it is."

Lotus frowned. She was not unfamiliar with his kind of attitude. Although verbally, he said that he was hiring her, it felt to her more as though she was being bought. Just as she was about to bawl out a few sentences, Breeze gently tugged on her hand. "Even though the requests must be fulfilled, it doesn't mean that it'll be accepted. There are some things that even witches can't do. Besides, all parties have to approve before an agreement can be made."

"You mean that money alone isn't enough? I've never seen a deal like this," Durat spoke with displeasure. "Was what you said when you cast the 'Sleeping Island' mere rhetoric to make fun of us? "No one will believe or be interested in you if this goes on."

"I doubt so," someone responded from behind. "There's only one witches' guild that offers rewards, whether it be in the Fjords or the Four Kingdoms. If you don't come, there will be others."

"Who speaks?" The merchant turned his head and received a rude shock. "Y... Your Highness Thunder!"

"I came up with some of the ideas for the regulations of the 'Sleeping Spell'. Before a contract is signed, the consent of the employee has to take into consideration the possible risks associated with the tasks. They'll not be forced to venture into grave danger," Thunder said in a clear voice and laughed. "Do you have an issue with this?"

"No... this is definitely reasonable." Durat's facial expression

restored to normal. "Then... I'll still have to trouble you in the future, Miss Lotus."

"Phew." Lotus watched the merchant and his entourage make their departure, and sighed in relief. "Thanks."

"No problem, I was just passing through." Thunder laughed. "Didn't you follow Lady Tilly to the Western Region?"

"Yes, but I came back early together with Honey and Breeze, because Sleeping Island needed to prepare supplies and houses for winter." She gave him a simple account of the matter. "Have you completed your expedition?"

"Hahaha, yes... it was an incredible and unimaginable trip." Thunder's eyes lit up as soon as she mentioned his expedition. "This was the first time I saw different sea levels occurring at the same time. Our ship seemed as though it was flying. We didn't 'fall' into the sea when we advanced past the cliffs that were formed by the waves! If I hadn't seen it myself, I absolutely wouldn't believe that such a strange sight could be real."

"Different... sea levels?" Lotus murmured. "How could it be? The sea water ain't rocks. Wouldn't it flow downwards?"

"Hmm, I named it the 'Sealine', and it's located to the northeast of the Shadow Islands. When we reached the top of a cliff, it would appear like a long line which we couldn't see the ends of, and the sea would seem to be divided into two distinct sections." He patted his chest excitedly. "I can't wait to venture even further next time!"

It was indeed worthy of the most prominent explorer in the Fjords that the first thing he talked about upon his return was regarding his adventures, and not regarding his daughter who was far away in the Western Region. Lotus shook her head helplessly as she watched him talk on and on.

Before darkness fell and the temperature outdoors plunged, Lotus had already climbed early into the heated brick bed. This was the most relaxing moment of her day. For more than a month, she not only constructed a new batch of houses but also renovated the creaking houses of other witches. Crowding on to the heated brick bed with everyone else and chatting about her experiences in Border Town, the questions from her companions - which were borne out of a mix of curiosity and envy - ensured that she did not get any sleep for half of the night.

The conversation topic shifted to the Bird Beak Mushrooms.

Her companions started to salivate when she mentioned how she prepared them. She would place the mushrooms in some butter and flip them a few times, then fry until both sides of the mushrooms were golden brown in color, and finally sprinkle a bit of salt on top to create a most delicious dish.

"Mmm... I feel like eating this," Shadow exclaimed. "After eating dried fish onboard for a month, my mouth is full of a salty and fishy smell."

"Great," Molly could not help interrupting Lotus. "If only I was

the one whom Lady Tilly's elder brother invited."

"Hey, there are even more amazing things you haven't heard." Someone giggled. "In the showers of Border Town, the water comes straight out of the wall, and the scented soap makes your whole body smell great after showering."

"There's really something like this?" Shadow asked curiosly.

"Of course, and I even brought one back." Lotus curled her lips upwards. "But it has been used up."

"Don't talk about it. At least they got to experience it. I followed Lady Tilly to the Western Region and then immediately brought these girls back here. I didn't get to enjoy anything!" Breeze bemoaned.

As she listened to the witches' gabbling discussions, Lotus suddenly had a thought.

If it was instead His Highness Roland Wimbledon who wanted to hire her long term, would she have agreed?

After contemplating for a while, she realized that she would not be able to refuse if it was indeed Roland.

What an embarrassment!

Lotus tucked herself inside her quilt and glanced left and right. Luckily, the lamp was already extinguished, or else someone might have realized what she was thinking about.

However, when would Lady Tilly finally be able to accept His Highness Roland?

It would be great if they could stay together forever. Lotus held the cloth tightly in her arms. If so, it would be good for me and the other witches, as we would all be able to live happily in Border Town.

Chapter 402: Organizational Structure

At the beginning of the second month of winter, Barov walked into Roland's office, carrying a stack of books under his arms.

As he walked up to Roland's table, a huge color painting on the table caught his attention. "Is this... a map of the entire Western Region?"

"Not just the Western Region," Roland said, laughing. "It also includes a portion of the Barbarian Land and the Misty Forest, especially this space over here." He pointed to an area in the northern part of the Impassable Mountain Range—it was the Fertile Plains that Agatha had talked about. "At present, the area that we've already discovered is equivalent to three Western Regions. If we manage to cultivate the land of this large space, we can resettle hundreds of thousands of people."

In order to eliminate the threat that came from Devil's Town, he had sent Lightning and Maggie to comb through the area and draw up a map. Now that Maggie could carry Soraya while she did the drawing, more accurate maps could be drawn. Although the disappearance of the Devil's camp was still a mystery, the good news was that there was no sign of another enemy camp within 200 kilometers of Border Town.

"In the Barbarian Land, there aren't only demonic beasts, but also... scary enemies, like you said." Barov's words came with a hint of hesitation. "Won't it be too dangerous to cultivate the land towards the northwest?"

"By that time, the First Army will most likely be equipped with the power to fight demons." Roland slowly swiveled his finger around the plains on the map. "It won't be safe anywhere if we're unable to defeat these enemies."

Ever since demon scouts were spotted in the Misty Forest, he knew that he could not conceal this information for long. In order to prevent the panic that could be brought about by a sudden revelation, he first disclosed the existence of demons to his top brass. Judging from the current situation, the reaction of the people were fairly normal. Of course, he had slightly downplayed the strength of the demons by asserting that they were of the same ilk as demonic hybrid beasts, while he did not divulge the history of the two Battles of Divine Will.

Roland knew that his kingdom could not remain on the mainland border forever if it wanted to be on par with the Four Kingdoms. Only the Barbarian Land... or should we say, the Fertile Plains, was a land area that was worthy of his governance. In fact, the area that had been explored was only a tiny fraction of the entire plains. One could imagine the vast amount of land that humans occupied during the second Battle of Divine Will.

He retracted his finger, then rolled up the map and placed it to one side. "Do you have any news to report?"

"Yes, Your Highness." Barov nodded and then spread the books that were under his arms in front of the prince. "I've drawn up a plan for the City Hall's expansion according to your demands."

"Oh? I'll have a look."

In order to cope with the rapid growth of territory after the establishment of the city, Roland utilized a futuristic classification of his government's functional departments, and thus set a new framework for management organizations of his time. Overall, the upper sector of the government was divided into four main branches, namely the City Hall, the military, the Security Bureau and the Witch Union.

Under the expansion plan, the new City Hall would assume the role of the cabinet or State Department, and would be the core institution of the entire territory. In time, the personnel would increase to approximately 500 people. Its six departments would be finance, foreign affairs, education, agriculture, industry and law, while new departments could be added at any time according to demand. Moreover, if (or when) the Kingdom of Graycastle was reunified, all of the other cities could follow this template and set up corresponding lower sector institutions, and together they would be managed by the City Hall.

In addition to its battle staff, the military also had independent production and medical departments that served as logistical safeguards. Every military division had a commander-in-chief who was responsible for specific combat matters, but the supreme authority of the military rested with Roland himself.

The Security Bureau was a secret organization which hid in the dark. Its funds were not allocated by the City Hall, while its members were also not recorded in any dossier. Its primary functions were to monitor and ensure the security within the territory and handle issues of official corruption.

Lastly, the Witch Union... Roland had thought hard about this organization but eventually decided that it would be a separate department, instead of sorting the witches into the other departments.

This was because, for some of the witches, their abilities would increase dramatically after evolution, and then they would be able to work across multiple departments. For example, Anna and Soraya could both play important roles in industry, agriculture, military, and education.

Another reason was that there would be times when a witch would not be assigned any work, and therefore, classifying them together could effectively avoid dampening their enthusiasm. This was a point that Scroll and Wendy had brought up to him.

Roland hoped that in the future, the Witch Union would operate on its own, which included handling its membership, inspection and work allocation.

"Are you really able to hire so many literate people?" After he finished reading the City Hall Director's proposal, Roland raised his head and asked. A 500-person institution was considered enormous in this era. Plus, the requirement that every employee had to be literate would almost certainly be impossible to fulfil in other territories. Although the royal city of each kingdom might have sufficient literate people, these were in large part nobles who were too proud and arrogant to be willing to serve as apprentices.

"Add in the fresh batch of graduates and there shouldn't be a problem," Barov replied. "According to the feedback from the recruitment notices, jobs in the City Hall are the most popular."

"It seems that being a civil servant is popular everywhere..." Roland arced his lips upwards uncontrollably. "In that case, go ahead and recruit people according to this scheme. The next and final task is to formulate laws."

"Pass me the principal article that you mentioned the last time, and I'll have my apprentices complete the rest as fast as possible," the City Hall Director said in high spirits.

"It's called Basic Laws," Roland said and laughed. It appeared that enthusiastic "model workers" were not only confined to witches—this was a good sign for a new regime.

"Another thing, Your Highness," Barov said. "If the City Hall is expanded according to the plan, the current building may not be able to accommodate so many people. Can..."

"You want to build a new City Hall?" The prince nodded in agreement. "For sure. I'll arrange Karl to see to it." In the eyes of the citizens, this was the face of the lord. While they rarely had the chance to enter the castle, they would often settle matters in the City Hall. Thus, a certain degree of splendor and style was necessary. If it was austere and unembellished, the people's confidence in him might erode.

After Barov took his leave, Roland called his guards to bring in

Prius Dessau, the knight from the Elk Family.

Roland had not seen him for half a year. The knight was visibly fatter and his face fuller than usual, while his cheeks even glowed a bright red. Life had certainly been good.

"Recently, there's been more eggs and poultry in the Convenience Market. This's all your credit." Roland smiled. "Your way of raising chickens and ducks must be great."

"Hehe..." Prius laughed, somewhat embarrassed. "Without your support from the start, I couldn't have done any of this."

Farming was not a smooth journey. When Prius first started, the fowl plague even appeared and caused the death of many chickens. Roland simply thought of it as a good lesson and did not give up on him. Instead, the prince continued to buy baby chicks from the Stronghold and passed them to him for raising. Presently, he had become an indispensable talent of the town's community.

"I plan to recruit you in the City Hall under the agriculture department. Do you agree?"

"Your Highness, you... don't want me to continue raising chickens and ducks?" Prius was slightly surprised.

"Of course not. You've been doing a great job, and therefore, I hope that you can bring more people into this business." Roland said encouragingly, "Soon, I plan to expand the scale of farming by

more than ten times. Then, you and your family won't be able to handle it alone. After you're recruited in the City Hall, you can pass on your experience to more people and teach them how to farm."

Given Lily's ability to eliminate bacteria and diseases, the most thorny problems of animal husbandry ceased to exist. Apart from chickens and ducks, large livestock such as cows and lambs were also within the prince's expansion plans.

"This is undoubtedly a noble job that's no less honorable than knighthood." The prince paused for a moment and then continued speaking. "There'll be a day when eggs and poultry will be served on the dining tables of every household in the Western Region. And when people see these delicious foods, they'll all remember your name. What do you think?"

"I'm... willing to serve you." Prius Dessau clenched his fists and bowed respectfully.

Chapter 403: Student And Teacher

Nana yawned loudly as she got off the bed.

She glanced at the whiteness outside the window. Still, she could see nothing but snow.

Reluctantly, she moved out of the warm bed and put on her thick winter coat. As she trudged out of the bedroom, she saw Aunt Alda tidying up the living room.

"Good morning," she muttered.

"Ah, little princess, you're awake." Alda smiled at her. "Want breakfast? It's ready."

"Yes." Nana sat beside the dining table and ran her eyes around the room, but she did not see her father. "Where's Daddy?"

"Lord Pine went out early in the morning," Alda replied from the kitchen. "He was carrying his silver shotgun."

"Indeed." Nana curled her lips upwards. "He's probably gone to the city wall to practice shooting again—ever since he fended off the demonic beasts with the flintlock, he has become enamored by this loud and booming weapon. Not only does he wipe a gun barrel every day, but also he'll go to the city wall to practice whenever he has time. Furthermore, he managed to apply for a specially-made flintlock from his Highness using my healing abilities as a

bargaining chip.

"It's all His Highness' fault for saying that long shotguns are the standard equipment for hunters," Nana thought. "If Mummy's still around, Daddy probably won't go out all day long like this."

"Breakfast's here." Alda placed two steaming plates on the table in front of Nana. "Fried eggs and white bread. Eat while they're hot."

"Thank you."

Breakfast's normally prepared before Daddy leaves home. Only Aunt Alda would specially place it in hot water to keep it warm. If instead, Daddy took care of me, I'd be eating cold and hard eggs.

Nana sighed uncontrollably.

If only Aunt Alda could marry Daddy.

But the young girl knew that this wish had little chance of happening. Alda was the family servant while Daddy was a noble of Border Town—as far as she understood, it was difficult for a commoner and a noble to get married.

She devoured the delicious breakfast, wiped her mouth, and shouted. "I'm going to the medical center."

"Okay." Alda put down the broom she was holding, and led Nana to the door. As she bent down and tied a scarf around Nana's neck, she said, "Be careful on the road, Miss Pine."

"Yes, Aunt!"

White snowflakes greeted Nana as she made her way out of the house.

This was her daily routine: In the morning, she would leave home for the medical center. She would treat the patients if there were any, or else, she would practice her abilities on animals. At noon, she would go to the castle to have lunch with Roland, while in the afternoon until night time, she would remain in the medical center, after which she would return home—she was the only witch who did not live in the castle.

Although time in the medical center was boring, she persisted because she wanted the patients to receive treatment as quickly as possible. The smile and warmth of the townspeople also supported and pushed her on.

"Lady Nana, good morning!"

"Miss Angel, going to the medical center again?"

"Today's weather ain't good. Do take care of your body."

"Miss Pine, have you eaten breakfast? Why not have a bowl of hot

oatmeal that I just prepared?"

Greetings like these continued incessantly whenever she walked in public. It was a stark contrast to a year ago. Her sisters claimed that she was currently the most popular witch in Border Town, even more popular than Anna. Nana wasn't concerned about a popularity contest, albeit she was happy with the current atmosphere. Every person whom she had treated before would greet her affectionately, and this filled her with a sense of achievement.

"Elder sister Anna was right," Nana thought. "The only way to change people's prejudices was to face them adamantly."

When she arrived at the medical center, the First Army soldier who was manning the gate bowed and greeted her. "Hello, Miss Nana."

"Good morning, are there patients today?"

"Not at the moment," the soldier replied. "But your friends have come."

"Friends?" She was surprised. "Could it be Anna?" As she thought of Anna, she excitedly ran up to the second floor and pushed open the door, only to find Mystery Moon, Hummingbird, and Lily idly lying on the table. On noticing her, the three of them immediately got up and surrounded her.

"You three..."

"Haha, are you pleasantly surprised? We came all the way just to see you!" Mystery Moon raised her arms and exclaimed.

"Mystery Moon suggested that instead of lazing about in the castle, it would be a good idea to come out for a walk," Hummingbird added.

"You two may be free, but I'm certainly not. I still have many insect samples to observe." Lily, who was standing at the back, lamented. "Nana must be very busy as well. You think that she's like you?"

"Is that so? Yesterday, I peeked and saw you dozing off in front of the microscope. You were obviously sick of your job." Mystery Moon shrugged her shoulders.

"Nothing of that sort!"

Nana was slightly disappointed that it wasn't Anna who turned up, but she quickly buoyed up. At present, Anna was His Highness' busiest subordinate, and naturally, could not spend as much time with her as in the past.

"No, I'm in fact very free," she replied, laughing. "Thank you, you three."

"Ahem... since you say so, I shall remain behind to accompany

you." Lily turned her head. "It won't be a problem to observe the samples tomorrow."

"What are we gonna play?" Hummingbird questioned.

"What else?" Mystery Moon took out a pack of playing cards. "Of course, this!"

"Aye, 'Fight the Landlord' may be interesting, but it's a three-player game."

"No, not 'Fight the Landlord'." She shook her head uncannily. "A new game that's suitable for four players, where we compete to see who can show her cards the fastest. I learned it from Andrea's group only yesterday!"

"The three-player group of the Sleeping Island?" Lily said, holding her forehead. "You learn poorly from others, yet still choose to learn from this bunch... had you used your energy to learn new knowledge from His Highness instead, you won't have made so little progress until now."

"This was also handed down by His Highness." Mystery Moon retorted. "Why's it not considered part of His Highness' new knowledge?"

"Other than you, there's probably no one in the Witch Union who thinks this way." Lily stared at her for a moment.

"I'd like to learn as well..." Hummingbird mumbled softly.

Nana watched the conversation going on, and laughed uncontrollably. She felt like she was back to the carefree days when she attended Teacher Karl's academy.

...

Under the company of the three witches, the morning time, which was usually boring, passed quickly. They then went to the castle for lunch together, after which Nana returned to the medical center alone.

As she stepped into the hall, she saw someone unexpected.

Karl Van Bate.

"Mr. Karl!" Nana said in surprise. "What brings you here?"

"To see you." Karl smiled and gazed at her, and then said happily, "You... have grown up."

"Is that so?" Nana lowered her head, as if embarrassed. "I'm still a long way from Anna."

"Everyone's different. You have your strong points." He laughed. "Watching you and Anna grow up, as well as observing the town's changes, it seems that I can no longer see the cracks."

"What cracks?" Nana was confused.

"Nothing... I'm just spouting nonsense." Karl shook his head. "I used to believe that the god had forsaken this world, but now, I feel that it continues to watch over us."

"Not a god," Nana corrected him. "His Highness says that these are the fruits of human efforts. Weren't those residential communities built by you?"

"But without an origin, nothing could have happened. At that time, when I thought that Anna was dead, and you somehow awakened as a witch, I was utterly flustered. It might have been a God who heard my prayers and answered my call." Karl said in a gentle voice. "It brought us His Highness Roland."

Chapter 404: The Journey To Magnetoelectricity

"Ah... I envy Nana so much." Mystery Moon wiped her wet hair and drew her face close to Lily who was sitting upright at the desk.

"Hmm," Lily replied without even turning her head.

"You don't ask why I envy her?"

"You'll soon fill me in anyway," Lily said, twitching her mouth.

"Damn it!" Mystery Moon mumbled, but could not help saying in the end, "Didn't you see how the soldiers at the hospital and the townsmen nearby treat her?"

"Saw it."

"'Hello, Miss Nana,' 'Are you leaving, Miss Angel?' 'Miss Pine, this is the wheat cake I made,' ... I want to be treated like that, too!" Mystery Moon pressed her face onto Lily's cheek, but was pushed away relentlessly.

"That's a return for her ability," Lily said without turning a hair. "Didn't you notice that ever since the Months of the Demons, she's been staying at the hospital almost every day, waiting to treat the wounded? Half of the locals have received her treatment, and the rest are pretty much their families."

"You're exaggerating."

"Not really," Lily said with a sigh and put down the book in her hand. "Although not everyone will fight against demonic beasts at the city wall, it's perfectly normal for townies to get injured—miners can hurt their toes by ores; kiln labors can get burned. The same applies to the apprentices at the steam engine plants and the chemistry laboratory." She paused for a moment and said, "His Highness once told me that Nana and I are the foundation of medical care in Border Town; one of us for internal medication and the other surgery. This allows the operation to remain at an intense level, while still make sure everyone is healthy without establishing a safety policy. However, in fact, I haven't done anything except epidemic prevention for new refugees."

"So you're feeling sour like me!" Mystery Moon said, leaning over unyieldingly.

"No, I'm not!" Lily fired. "And stay away from me. You're interfering with my reading."

"Aw..." Mystery Moon chickened and said, "but I'm really envious of her."

"Then learn from Nana. Take the initiative to help every townie until they know you and get familiar with you. Then surely everybody will say hello to you wherever you go," said Lily, shrugging her shoulders.

"But I don't have an ability like Nana's," Mystery Moon said, frustrated.

"Then use your physical strength if not your ability," said Lily, mocking. "Regardless, you've been there at the camps of the Witch Cooperation Association."

"You... rascal!"

Mystery Moon still nursed a grudge when she went to bed. She knew that Lily was right, but being inferior to the other witches chafed her pride. This was intolerable. She had gone through so much pain before finally finding an ideal place to settle down and idling about all day was torture.

Mystery Moon slept fitfully all night. She knocked on Roland's office door with dark circles below her eyes the following day.

"What's the matter?" the prince asked in surprise. "Were you bullied?"

"By Lily... No, nevermind." She leaned dramatically on Roland's desk and asked, "Your Highness, didn't you say that I have great potential? Why's there no change in my ability yet? It really can't evolve unless I understand Natural Science Theoretical Foundation?"

"I see," Roland said, trying in vain to suppress his laughter. "Actually, I've been thinking about this problem, too."

"What problem?"

"Didn't Agatha say that over 400 years ago, the witches at the Union experienced High Awakening even without a comprehensive understanding of the world? Apart from basic practices, the rest will be a sudden enlightenment—this could be achieved by the observation of natural phenomena, or by an accidental flash of inspiration." Roland continued, "However, the latter is apparently not comparable to the awakening inspired by systematic learning. Look at Agatha's magic power. She's not only the weakest one among the evolved witches, but she can't even compete with some of the ordinary witches such as Sylvie and Andrea."

"Doesn't matter, as long as it evolves!" Mystery Moon's eyes were sparkling. "You've got an idea?"

"It may not work," the prince said, throwing up his hands, "but it's worth a try. What do you know about magnetic forces?"

"Um... A force produced by the directional movement of electrons, which a magnetic field acts on the magnetic bodies and electric currents in it."

"That was copied from the book," he smiled and said. "You memorized it well, but you probably don't understand it at all."

Mystery Moon hesitated for a moment and nodded.

"You've seen lines of magnetic forces simulated by iron powder. You also know the direction of magnetic forces, and have seen the DC generator, too. So I think... you may not enable closed circuits to quickly cut lines of magnetic forces, yet you can change the magnetic field you form, thereby personally experiencing the transformation from magnetism to electricity. "

"I don't quite follow you."

"The nature of the transformation from magnetism to electricity is the change in magnetic flux. If you wanna change the magnetic flux in a constant magnetic field, the only way is to change the area, that is, to cut magnetic induction lines." The prince drew a diagram on the paper and said, "What if the area remains constant? That'll be changing the magnetic field, which means changing the magnetic flux."

Mystery Moon groped unsuccessfully for adequate words, failing because she didn't understand a word.

The prince laughed and said, "It's OK that you don't get it. You only need to do this—quickly release and withdraw your magnetic forces rather than continuously use your power."

"And then?" Mystery Moon waited for Roland to continue.

"Nothing more." He shook his head. "This is the only step."

"Huh? Just release and withdraw magnetic forces?"

"Correct. If you can also change the direction of lines of magnetic forces, that would be perfect. For example, switch from the left hand to the right hand." The prince smiled and said, "While you practice, I'll prepare a 'little toy' for you. You'll know why when you get the hang of this method."

...

Two days later, Mystery Moon received what His Highness called a "little toy". It was a square frame made of copper wires, the top of which was connected to a glass ball no bigger than half of a fist. Taking a closer look, she could see the copper wires were cut open in the ball, and were connected by a much finer metal wire.

An accompanying instruction manual read, "Hold the two ends of the square frame with both hands and practice. Note: be sure to draw the curtains and hide the Stone of Light."

What the heck is that?

She scratched her head and then did what the instruction manual instructed— "It's practice no matter how I do it. Just ignore it, and it'll be fine."

Mystery Moon learned that it was not hard to quickly release and withdraw her power, but changing the direction of magnetic forces delivered a blinding headache. Magnetic force was an essential

power to her and at first, this endeavor was akin to breathing with only one nostril at a time. Although Mystery Moon had restrained herself from playing poker games and been dutifully practicing her new skill for the last two days, the result lasted merely half a minute.

She took a deep breath and summoned the magic power in her body.

At first she felt nothing, but soon she saw a flash of red light.

The metal wire in the glass ball turned orangy red, and the light became increasingly bright and intense. In a few seconds, the light was glaring. Mystery Moon almost could not believe her eyes. The inkily dark room was lit by soft light much purer than the candle light, which she had never seen.

She was still in a daze when the red light faded away accompanied by a feeble popping sound before the darkness enveloped the room again.

Chapter 405: Accompany

The next morning, Mystery Moon ran to the office in a hurry with bigger dark circles under her eyes.

"Why would the glass ball light up? It didn't work afterwards, no matter how hard I tried to apply my power..." she could not wait to spit it all out after pushing open the door.

"That... fast?" The prince was a little surprised. He put down the quill, took the small object from Mystery Moon and said, "I thought it would take you two or three days."

Mystery Moon bent over, propped up her chin on the edge of the desk, and asked with a blink, "What on earth was glowing?"

"That was electric light." The prince smiled and said, "You released lightning from the sky."

"Lightning?" She could not help repeating the word in a quiet voice, and then shook her head. "But it didn't look like it at all. This light was a red-orange color, and kept glowing—lightning is always just a flash."

"The lightning lit the filament, making it glow continuously." The prince twisted the glass ball and took it off, then said, "It's fine that you don't understand it. I'll let you see the real electric light later."

Mystery Moon's eyes were wide open. She gazed at Roland's every single movement, afraid of missing something. The prince drew the two copper wires closer and put the glass ball back again. "There you go. Now continue to practice."

"That's it?" She took the wire frame, utterly disappointed.

"That's right," the prince covered his mouth and said, "and don't forget to draw the curtains when practicing."

...

Lily was sitting at the end of the bed reading Natural Science Theoretical Foundation when Mystery Moon returned to the bedroom.

"Why are you up so early today?" she asked in surprise. "Since you're up, bring me breakfast. An omelet and bread, please. No porridge."

"No, I won't bring breakfast for a traitor," Mystery Moon said with a grunt. She drew the curtains, and the room turned completely dark in an instant.

"Hey, what're you doing?" Lily frowned and asked.

"Practicing my ability." She threw herself on the floor and said, "Draw the curtains and hide the Stone of Light—that's His Highness' requirement."

"Fine, fine," the little girl rolled her eyes and said, "I'll do my reading in the hall."

"No, you can't!" Mystery Moon hollered.

"Why?" Lily darted her a look, "I can't read when I'm starving, and I have to stay with you here?"

"Um..." Mystery Moon paused a moment, "I'll bring you breakfast. Can you stay here?"

"What?" Lily asked with great interest, "Are you afraid of the dark?"

"Not at all!" She puffed out her cheeks and muttered after a while, "I just need company."

She wanted somebody to witness her progress and be amazed at her ability. Even if she failed, she hoped someone would still comfort her, but she would rather carry these words to her grave than confide in Lily.

"Okay then. I'll stay with you this time, since you sound so pathetic," Lily said with a yawn. "Breakfast, quick!"

Mystery Moon finally got ready to practice after reluctantly bringing the breakfast over.

Lily swallowed the egg in content and asked, "What're you going to do? Magnetize the stuff in your hand?"

"No, I'm going to let the magnetic forces in my hand change quickly. His Highness says that'll produce thunder and lightning."

Lily was stunned—"Thunder and lightning?"

"Yeah, I'm going to start..."

"Hold on," the little girl shouted, drawing closer to the door. "It's good now. Go ahead."

Mystery Moon exhaled a long breath and mobilized her magic power as she had earlier. If this happened at the camps of the Witch Cooperation Association, Supervisor Cara would definitely scold her for such behavior. However, His Highness had intentionally replaced all the wares in the bedroom that contained iron, including iron nails with copper-made items, making it easy for her to practice.

She was generously treated in Border Town and would not allow herself to sit idle.

Reminiscences of her experience in the town swarmed back upon her, image by image, as vivid as a merry-go-round. This time Mystery Moon found herself quickly in a ready state. The magic power danced between her hands with increased movement and

growing intensity.

Then she saw the electric light. Like a blue ghost revealing itself from layers of clouds, the light was transient, and disappeared instantly. Nevertheless, she clearly saw a trace of electric light. It was like a tiny arc, spanning from one end of the copper wire to the other, bursting out gentle popping sounds.

It was far from the end.

Then came a second arc, and then a third... She noticed in dismay that every time the magnetic forces transformed, there was dazzling electric light springing up, the traces of which also changed correspondingly with its movements. With the direction of magnetic forces quickly switching back and forth, a bridge of blue and white gradually took shape between the two copper wires.

"What's that?" Lily who stood far away asked, her eyes wide open.

The electric light was insignificant compared with the red-orange blaze of yesterday, but it made Mystery Moon quiver in excitement —this was her first time witnessing her own ability! In comparison to the invisible lines of magnetic forces she could not understand in the slightest, the rythm at which the electric arc danced and the direction of its movement were completely under her control. This was truly "lightning" created by her.

Electricity generates magnetism, and vice versa. That's what it is.

She sensed the power in her body had become more visible and clear.

Mystery Moon got up on her feet and put the metal frame on the desk. She slowly released her hands to let the magic power die down, but the ends of the copper wires were still glittering, like flickering stars in the darkness from a far distance.

She now had a better understanding of these words.

In other words, electricity is magnetism, and vice versa.

Roland kneaded his sore neck with a quill between his teeth.

"Do you need a hand?" Nightingale's voice popped up by his ears.

"Ah, thank you," he nodded slightly and said. Nightingale thus laid her two fair hands on Roland's shoulders and started to massage his neck with just the right amount of strength.

Roland half closed his eyes, enjoying this moment of serenity. In order to draft the first code of the town, which would later serve as the Basic Laws of all the primary laws, he had been up earlier than even the guards for the past three days. It wasn't until today that he finally finished the draft. As Roland had no knowledge of the laws, he could only jot down some ten articles in plain language based on his understanding of the system, which was no longer

than two pages altogether.

Nonetheless, these articles contained ideas and ideology from the new world. He believed this code would enable him to carry out a brand new system which was entirely different from the ancient feudal system across the whole continent while expanding his territory. With this code as its base, his new kingdom would indubitably distinguish itself from the others.

"Your Highness!" The office door was suddenly flung open. Mystery Moon rushed in with the copper wire frame in her hand, shouting, "I finally got it!"

Roland opened his eyes, and saw the girl withdraw her hands and put the "little toy" on the desk.

"Look!" She did not touch the wire frame, but there was still an arc of light where the copper wires were cut open.

Looking at this incredible scene, Roland could not help dropping his jaw. The quill slid off the corner of his mouth and fell on the floor.

Chapter 406: The Limitation Of Magic Power

"What did I just see? A self-generating system of electricity that doesn't need an external energy supply!"

Mystery Moon's ability is an attaching type of magic so the answer is clear. She added a brand new property to the metal frame, and "her magic power acts as the energy supply," Roland mused to himself.

"How did you manage to do that?" Roland asked aloud.

"When you said that there's an intertwining relationship between electricity and magnetism, and that they're indivisible, I wondered if I could make the objects generate lightning by magnetizing them. I tried to add a constantly changing magnetic forces to the copper wires because you've said creating electricity requires changes in magnetic forces. Then it turned out this way," Mystery Moon answered cautiously, her eyes sparkling with expectation.

"That's why... Changes in electric currents do produce magnetic fields, but magnetic fields only generate electricity under certain circumstances. It requires both closed circuits and changes in magnetic flux; changes in the magnetic area and magnetic forces both need external energy supply."

Mystery Moon's new ability has replaced an energy supply with the self-changing magnetic force," the prince concluded. Roland would have thought it was a perpetual motion machine prototype,

if he saw it in modern times. Yet here in this world, he understood that powers of witches could not be judged by common sense of his time. The magnetic property added to the objects might not be produced by magnetic poles, just as the Blackfire was not natural fire.

They were tangible forms of the magic power.

He could only wonder whether Mystery Moon had noticed any magnetic force change in objects to which she attached her magic power.

When Roland asked her about it, she nodded and then shook her head. "When I was in the Witch Cooperation Association, I once wanted to change the magnetism of objects according to my will. To avoid causing my sisters any trouble, I tried to make the objects less magnetic when they were not in use. However, it didn't work. Their magnetic force remained the same. I thought it was impossible, so I gave up on it," she said.

"Just as I expected," Roland thought. He cocked his head towards Nightingale and said, "The form of her magic power... "

"They have been united." Nightingale stepped out of her mist and smiled. "The two are now one."

Mystery Moon gasped, "Did I really... "

"Yes, you did. Your ability has evolved." Roland confirmed. "Only

a long-term and relentless dedication of practice can lead to enlightenment and evolution that fast. You did a great job. From now on, you'll be the sixth evolved witch in the Witch Union."

"Congratulations." Nightingale went to Mystery Moon and patted her head, smiling.

"Now, am I able to do more for Your Highness?" she asked, her eyes shining with excitement.

"Yes, countless things," Roland smiled and said. "As I've told you before, you've got great potential. But first, go rest. You have dark circles as huge as fists around your eyes. I'll test your ability in the afternoon."

"Yes!" she nodded vigorously.

After Mystery Moon left the office, Nightingale purposefully shut the door and turned her attention to Roland. Ignoring her regular perche at either Roland's desk or the French window, she drew close to him. Grasping his shoulders and leaning in to speak, she stood so close that strands of her fair hair tickled his face. He felt his heart beating violently at the sight of her bright eyes and soft, red lips.

Eh? What's going on? Is she asking for it in broad daylight?"

"Tell me the method." These were not the words that the prince had expected to hear from Nightingale, "Wait... what's this have to

do with anything?"

"What method?" he asked.

"The method to evolve without reading Natural Science Theoretical Foundation?" she said excitedly, "I can tell from Mystery Moon's grades that she doesn't understand the contents of the book, but you taught her how to evolve and gain a new ability! What should I do? Practice with 'little toys' as well?"

"Eh, she is asking for the evolvement method. What a pity... no, a relief." Roland thought and cleared his throat, putting himself together. "I'm afraid your ability won't evolve through a sudden flash of enlightenment," he said.

"Why not?"

"According to Agatha, only observing natural phenomena related to your ability can provoke an evolvement. Your Mist is just too incredible for me to understand, let alone guide you to learn about it." Roland explained. "Maybe the only method for you to develop your magic power is a sound understanding of natural science, physics and even advanced mathematics."

Nightingale's face fell. She feebly walked to the couch and sank back into it, feeling as if her body was hollowed out.

After lunch, Roland spent the whole afternoon conducting a comprehensive test on Mystery Moon's new ability.

He named it "Variable Magnetic Force." It could be applied to any object like her magnetizing ability, and it would create periodic variation based on the magic power she initially conjured. However, as far as insulators, no electricity would be generated.

Roland determined that Mystery Moon's magic power was the weakest of the evolved witches. She could only light up two Magic Stones embedded in the Sigil of God's Will, half a stone less than even Maggie. Unfortunately, the attaching-type magic ability required a vast amount of magic power. The greater and longer variations in magnetic forces, the greater demand for magic power. After a series of tests, Roland found that Mystery Moon's new ability could serve as a stable battery, but it was far from sufficient to drive a large electric motor or power a steam engine. He tested her ability by transforming an old DC motor, initially used for the electrolysis of water, into an electric motor, and the result was disappointing. The motor, which consumed all of Mystery Moon's magic power to add a magnetic force, could only work half day. That meant her new ability could not practically be used as a source power.

Roland didn't tell Mystery Moon the bad results. Instead, he encouraged her to keep studying and practicing her new ability, because she was fragile and he feared bad news would be devastating.

Besides, he knew that ability evolution was not a sudden transformation, but a metamorphosis through learning.

Roland remembered something he had heard from Agatha, the

method to jointly produce Stone of Light. He thought, "If there is a witch who can control or transfer magic power, Mystery Moon's power limitation won't be a problem anymore."

In the evening, he went to talk to Tilly Wimbledon.

"An assistant witch with a controlling type of magic?" she said after hearing the prince's idea. She thought for a while and answered, "No witch of the Sleeping Island has that kind of ability."

"Really?" he asked, heaving a sigh. "It seems that Mystery Moon has to depend on herself to improve."

Yet what Tilly said next cheered him. "However, I know where you can find the witch you want."

Chapter 407: Tilly's Questioning

"You mean... she didn't follow you to Sleeping Island?" The prince soon got what Tilly meant.

"Exactly." Princess Tilly shook her head helplessly. "Her name is Spear Passi and her ability is magic power channeling. She can channel magic powers of several witches. In other words, a witch at one end of the channel can borrow magic powers from other witches connected, so you may need her help." Tilly paused for a while and continued. "She lives right in Fallen Dragon Ridge."

"Since you know so much about her, you must have contacted her," Roland asked for further explanation, "and what're the reasons for her to stay there? There's a risk that she'll be caught by the church."

After a moment of silence, Tilly answered, "That's because she's a Marquess and Lord of Fallen Dragon Ridge."

"Lord?" He was startled, "A witch?"

"Yes, her father Marquis Passi, the last Lord, gave the title and the territory to her, instead of to his second and third son. Due to her high rank, Spear can conceal her witch identity pretty well, and thus can lead a far better life than ordinary witches," Tilly said slowly, "and she contacted me first and offered her help during the migrations. Because of her, I was able to quickly gather the witches from the towns in the southern and middle parts of the Kingdom."

"'She contacted me first'...", Roland sensed something strange thereinto and asked, "Wait... She didn't intend to give a shelter to her fellow witches?"

"No." Tilly shook her head. "Not only that, she also wanted those witches to leave her territory as soon as possible and protect themselves from being tortured by the church. Spear apparently values her lord title more."

Her Lord title would no doubt be in danger if the church found she was protecting witches. Unlike towns in the remote border area, Fallen Dragon Ridge had well-established churches and priests, and their believers greatly outnumbered those in the Western Region. Roland understood her choice but was still astonished. "If a witch in her territory is seized, will she..."

"I asked her the same question," Tilly said with some sadness, "and Spear Passi bluntly told me if a witch was caught by the people, she would try to replace her in the jail with a death-row prisoner and secretly send her out of her territory; but if a witch was caught by the Verdict Army or judged by the church, she would just stand by."

"..." Roland thought, "It turned out that Spear Passi voluntarily got in touch with Tilly because of the hidden danger of witches in Fallen Dragon Ridge. That was why Tilly chose to leave for the Fjords, which was a new place for her despite the risk of crossing the channel, instead of settling down in Fallen Dragon Ridge." At this thought, he frowned and asked Tilly, "If I invite her to Border Town, will she come?"

"I won't bank on that, but you may have a try," Tilly threw up her hands and said, "I'm just telling you where you can find her but I'm not promising anything."

Roland made a long sigh and said, "I'll send a messenger to talk to her first."

Without doubt, he would choose Nightingale as the messenger, given that she was able to avoid eyes and ears of the people when she got into the castle, and that she could also discern lies. As long as she made Spear believe she held no hostility, Spear would probably not overreact, either.

It generally took five or six days to travel from Border Town to Fallen Dragon Ridge by boat, but that trip would only cost Maggie half a day. They could bring Lightning, who acted faster as a helper. The three witches formed a team of the highest mobility in the Witch Union, and now equipped with guns, they could both attack enemies and defend themselves.

Thinking about the plan for quite a while, Roland made up his mind.

Assuming that the Marquise did not agree to come, it was still a matter of time for him to investigate the situation of her territory. As an important passage on the way to the Southernmost Region, Fallen Dragon Ridge was included in his spring attack plan.

"I heard there's a newly evolved witch in the castle?" Tilly suddenly switched the topic.

"Ah, you mean Mystery Moon. Yes, she did cohere her magic power," Roland nodded and told Tilly about her evolvement process. "But using the ancient witches' method to evolve is not very effective in increasing her magic power. To become someone like Anna, it still requires the thorough understanding of solid knowledge."

"But the ancient way is still a method," Tilly said with interest, "and there's a point I find very interesting in what you said just now. What did you mean by 'They're not natural phenomena but only concrete forms of magic powers'?"

"That was my personal speculation." He picked up his cup and had some tea. "Neither Anna's Heart Fire nor her Blackfire is something you can find in nature, so it's not hard to view them as concrete forms of magic powers, but what about the normal fires before the evolvement? So I assume the normal fires were also created by magic powers, and that it reflected what Anna perceived as 'heat'. As her perception became more thorough and profound, the images of 'heat' also changed. This explains exactly what Agatha has experienced. Many witches have similar abilities before their evolvement because they've observed the same natural phenomenon. After High Awakening, their abilities vary because their understandings of the phenomenon have huge differences."

"Sounds quite reasonable," Tilly replied without saying yes or no, "but according to your speculation, the witches of the same kind will evolve almost the same new abilities if they've same understandings of the phenomenon, right?"

"Yes, pretty much like that, but under the condition that they've got exactly the same understanding abilities."

Roland did not tell her another idea of his, which was to what extent magic powers could evolve. "Since magic power forms the foundation of all kinds of abilities, it is elementary and universal. Provided that there is a witch who understands everything in the nature, will she be able to display all kinds of abilities?"

"Are you... coming from a world without magic power?" Tilly suddenly questioned.

"Poof..." The tea nearly gushed out of the prince's mouth. He wiped his mouth and asked, "What, what did you say?"

"I've gone through all the books written by you during this month and always felt something was wrong." Princess Tilly looked at him in the eye. "I finally see what the problem is after hearing what you said just now. You separate magic power from the nature... Neither Natural Science Theoretical Foundation nor Elementary Physics mentions anything about magic power and you said concrete expressions of magic power were not something existing in the nature, but... magic power itself is a part of the nature."

Roland was stunned.

He suddenly realized that he completely forgot Tilly lived in a world where magic power naturally existed. So did the previous Prince Roland, but he just placed magic power in a position

opposite to natural phenomena and seemed to get used to it.

Blame the excess memories coming all of a sudden for this careless mistake? It probably won't work this time. It is acceptable to say that Prince Roland wrote these books based entirely on his memories, but how to explain that he firmly believes in them and subconsciously separate magic power from the nature? Is it possible for him to pledge that this is still the memory of the previous Prince Roland's?

Roland swallowed hard.

Chapter 408: The Conundrum

He couldn't believe that she was digging holes for him using the books that he wrote himself.

When faced with such complicated information, most people struggled to even understand it, let alone to notice its flaws—it was pretty unbelievable that there was no mention of magic power at all in a science book studying the nature of everything in the world.

Roland had also completely wiped the Fourth Prince's memories from his mind, and besides trying to mimic the Prince during his first month after traversing the space and time, he never considered it ever again. His ministers were afraid to question him, and he didn't have to hide who he was from the witches, so he became more and more careless.

However, Tilly was no ordinary witch.

Besides being Prince Roland's sister, she was also an Extraordinary.

Not only was she able to quickly finish all of his books, but she also shrewdly noticed this inconsistency. Her logic was just as clear as that of any modern person who had undergone universal education. In addition, she used leading questions to prove her point so that he had no chance of arguing his way out.

This was a disaster.

Roland's brain was spinning with frantic thoughts, but he had no idea how to respond to her. Any forced explanation to someone who could notice this inconsistency would only arouse more suspicion, and lying to cover a lie would only create even more issues.

Tilly broke the awkward silence and said gently, "You don't have to answer me right now. It's late, and I'm going back to the Witch House. You should get some rest too, Your Highness."

"Um... Okay." Roland stared into the eyes of this grey-haired woman, trying to understand her thoughts, and forgot to send her off.

Tilly stopped at his office door, turned around and asked, "I can trust you, right?"

Usually, Roland would have confidently agreed, but in that moment, he found himself struggling to respond and could only manage a slow nod.

After the door closed, Nightingale said, confused, "How could she just leave like that?"

"Why do you look so upset?" Roland scoffed at her.

"I was so close to hearing about your true life story!" Nightingale stuck out her tongue. "Why didn't she press on you harder?"

"Because she didn't want to risk our friendship." The Prince heavily sighed.

"What?"

"No... nothing." Roland leaned back in his chair and felt a chill on his back. Tilly's behavior was absolutely perfect because she didn't push him too far. Border Town was definitely the biggest ally to the Sleeping Island, and allies were more important than identities in the face of their enemies. If she strained their relationship by asking too much, it would only mean bad news for the witches of the Sleeping Island.

That was why Tilly left him some time to recover after posing her question. However, this didn't mean that she didn't need an answer, and if he kept dragging his feet, he could also lose her trust right after they defeated their enemies together. She had made her move, and it was time for him to respond.

However, Roland couldn't tell Tilly the truth, at least not at the moment—Anna and Nightingale were different because they knew only him from the very beginning, but Tilly was Prince Roland's little sister. Until he figured out what her real thoughts on her brother were, he would have to keep this secret to himself.

He shook his head and dismissed these annoying thoughts. Roland turned to Nightingale and said, "You heard our conversation earlier, too. What do you think about checking out the situation with Maggie and Lightning?"

"No problem, Your Highness."

"It's not just going to be a simple chat... To be honest, I'm a little worried about you," he slowly said.

"Wha... what's there to be worried about?" Nightingale stuttered.
"I... I'm fine, even if I have to drag her back..."

"That's exactly what I'm worried about!" Roland slammed on the table. "What do you mean drag her back? Are you trying to have her tear us to shreds? Listen, you have to be careful this time and check out the situation before you confront Spear Passi. It's alright if she refuses; just don't threaten her—as a fellow witch, she'll be no stranger to you."

"Uh... is that all?" she asked disappointedly.

"That's all in regards to witches." Roland frowned. "Additionally, you need to help Lightning record the layout of Fallen Dragon Ridge's surroundings, fortifications, sentries, and armies, and then return as quickly as possible."

Nightingale murmured in acknowledgment.

"And finally," Roland said, pausing, "be safe. This's the most important thing."

"Can we get another pint of ale over here?"

"Hey, is my oatmeal ready?"

"Coming, coming! Sorry for the wait!"

Otto Luoxi entered the pub, Covert Trumpeter, and was instantly surrounded by chaotic chatter. A crackling fire warmed him, and a smell of sour and musty body odor made him cringe. As a nobility, Otto rarely set foot into commoners' areas and was not used to being in close quarters with them. If not for his appointment with the Rats, he wouldn't be caught dead in this backalley pub in the outer city.

Following local rules, he quickly found his target—a skinny man wearing a hood sitting in an unlit corner of the pub, enveloped in the shadows. A small piece of bone lay next to his hand.

Otto sat across the man and said, "Cheers to Skeleton Fingers."

"You don't have liquor to give cheers."

"But I have the thing measuring all things on earth." He spoke the code word.

The man shrugged. "Call me Hood. I heard you're here to get

some information?"

Otto nodded. While Timothy was stalling on giving him a response, he hadn't been able to rest and was busy asking around about the rebel king—someone who could hold the Western Territory for half a year after the king's ascension and completely stump Timothy was surely with a force to be reckoned with.

The fastest way to gain as much information as possible was through the Rats.

This was the sixth Rat Otto had spoken to, and the information he had gained startled him. The legendary rebel king, Roland Wimbledon, fourth son of King Wimbledon III, was not showing any signs of weakening and was even challenging the new king with the threat of an attack to dethrone Timothy.

This man was also true to his word—although Timothy went to great lengths to hide the news, Otto was still able to find out about the strange collapse in King's City. If this news was true, an alliance with Timothy was questionable at best. He needed to get to the bottom of all this to protect the Kingdom of Dawn.

"That's right," Otto Luoxi whispered. "I want to know about the giant crash and collapse in the King's City palace three months ago."

Chapter 409: A Reliable Ally

"You've come to the right man," Hood smiled and said in a raspy voice that made it hard to tell his age. "Even though I live in the outer city, I happened to be near the palace on the day of the incident, and as soon as I heard the crash, I ran to the palace gate. You have no idea how terrifying the crash was, because it sounded like lightning hitting the earth. All the surrounding windows, whether paper or glass, were shattered by an invisible force, and some people were even scared to death by the sudden sound... "

Every Rat claimed to be nearby and to have witnessed everything, but each person's story was different from the other. "Okay, no need to ramble on about unimportant things. How did it happen?" Otto Luoxi interrupted and asked. "Was this incident really related to the Fourth Prince... Roland Wimbledon?"

Hood cleared his throat and stretched out his right hand. "I can answer that, but..."

"You need the thing measuring all things on earth, right?" Otto opened his wallet. "How much?"

The so-called "thing measuring all things on earth" was nothing more than a gold royal. Only uncultured people like Rats would use such an obvious code word or phrase to appear mysterious.

The Rat stuck up two fingers.

Otto took out two gold royals and placed them in Hood's hand.

"This is not a small fee, so I hope your information lives up to it."

"Of course. The reputation of Skeleton Fingers rests upon this." The Rat smiled greedily and pocketed the gold royals.

"A Rat's reputation is as ridiculous as a ruler's mercy." Otto sniffed. "Go ahead."

"I'll start by answering your first question." After his payment, Hood's posture was much more relaxed. He sipped his ale, leaned back in his chair, and pointed towards the ceiling. "Thunder comes from the sky."

"What do you mean?" Otto frowned.

"Didn't you want to know what caused the crash?" the Rat whispered. "All thunder comes from the sky, and this was no exception. I saw it with my own eyes. Before the crash, a white rock floated into the palace, and then the incident happened."

"Nonsense! You mean to tell me that a huge rock fell from the sky and smashed the palace into pieces?"

"Hehe, everything I said is true, or else Skeleton Fingers wouldn't assign me this task. If you think I'm lying, you can leave right now." Hood shrugged. "But you won't get your fee back."

"... Keep going." Otto tried to repress his annoyance.

"The rock entered the palace only seconds after it appeared, but I could clearly tell that it wasn't that big or fast and didn't like something that could destroy the Hall of Sky Dome, which is why I said it 'floated'. Also, when the crash and smoke appeared, I saw a menacing flash of fire that definitely wasn't caused by the collision," Hood said, smacking his lips. "I mean, His Highness Timothy's search afterwards proved this very point—he closed off and cleared the Inner City multiple times without arresting any suspects, and the palace is heavily guarded, so where else could the attack be from if not the sky?"

He took another sip of ale. "As for the fire and smoke, they resemble the phenomenon caused when an alchemy solution called snow powder burns, which is why I'm certain that this was an attack. By the way, I also have some information about snow powder, but you'd have to pay only a little more..."

"No need, I don't want to know." Otto interrupted. He had already heard through other channels about snow powder, which was originally used in celebrations but could be modified into a weapon. Rats probably didn't know anything about its specific content, so he didn't feel like wasting his money.

"Alright, now I'll answer your second question," Hood said, splaying his hands indifferently. "This incident was certainly related to Prince Roland."

"Why?"

"When did you arrive in King's City? Of course, I'm not trying to ask about your background or... identity, since that's a rule of Black Street, so you don't have to answer me." The Rat smiled. "What I mean is, if you arrived in King's City in early autumn, you'd know this: His Highness sent thousands of soldiers to attack Western Region, but only very few returned, all bearing letters from Prince Roland to His Highness."

All six Rats had mentioned this, which meant that it was probably true, but he continued to ask, "Are you talking about the warning of revenge? It sounds quite scary. Are you sure it's not pure folklore?"

"Most letters were brought by the soldiers into the palace, and the few that were leaked were mostly seized by the City Hall, but Skeleton Fingers always surprises its clients. I actually have a preserved 'warning' with me." Hood stuck up five fingers. "Considering it's a very rare letter from Prince Roland himself, the price is slightly higher. What do you think?"

...

Otto Luoxi returned to the palace, and Belinda immediately stood up to greet him. "Any news?"

"Not much, but I did get my hands on a letter from Prince Roland." He handed the wrinkly piece of paper to her, took off his coat, sat next to the fireplace, and told her all about what he had learned. "All six Rats gave similar answers to the second question, and this paper proves them right—Roland Wimbledon is not as weak as the King says he is, but the complete opposite. If the

Kingdom of Dawn allies with Timothy, we may benefit very little and gain a tricky enemy."

"But all the Rats' answers to the first question were different," Belinda said with a frown.

"This proves that the attack was very mysterious and difficult to understand, and I kind of believe what the last Rat said." Otto sipped his hot tea and sighed. Spending too much time in the cheap pub made him very uncomfortable.

"From the sky?" Belinda gaped at him. "Are you crazy?"

"Of course not. If I hadn't seen this letter, I wouldn't dream of it either. Roland was very confident about the time and location of the attack, and only an attack from the sky would be able to pass the high city wall and strong fortifications, confusing even the shrewdest Rats." He frowned. "However, what's more important is what we do next."

"With the imminent threat from the Church, they should stop fighting each other and join forces against their common enemy."

"That's not for us to decide." Otto shook his head. "The only thing we can do is to find a reliable ally for the Kingdom of Dawn. His Highness Timothy Wimbledon seems a little... unreliable."

"Are you really going to go to Western Region?" Belinda was shocked. "Isn't that a place currently facing the dangers of the

Months of the Demons?"

"It's nothing compared to the danger of our kingdom collapsing," he said after some silence. "You can stay here and wait for the new king's response, while I travel alone to Western Region."

Chapter 410: Expectations

The water vapor formed an even layer of white mist resembling thin gauze on the window pane. Chilly wind blew on the windows with a popping sound, which contrasted with the tranquil fireplace burning in the room.

Scroll sat in front of a long desk in the City Hall Office, reading rolls of thick documents.

Those documents were not about education but were statistics reported by various departments. She used her free time to memorize such information in case someone needed it. This was recently the main part of her work since there was not much to deal with in the Ministry of Education. After all, the second round of assessment ended not long ago, and another round wouldn't be carried out before next summer.

Having worked for His Highness Roland for half a year, she found out His Highness was particularly interested in statistics—he liked it when his subordinates described things with a long series of precise numbers; he frequently used terms such as horizontal ratio, year-on-year ratio, and chain relative ratio. Subsequently, all the staff in the City Hall had picked up this habit from him.

As the township population grew, the related statistical work increased correspondingly. Therefore, His Highness entrusted this work to Scroll and jokingly called her the "database" of Border Town. Although the nickname made her sound like a warehouse, His Highness described it as something extremely important. With the help of a database, he said he could estimate the development

of next year and make economic and military plans. He even said all his future decisions concerning the territory would be based on the data analysis.

"Lady Scroll." A woman dressed as an apprentice pushed open the office door and entered the room. After bowing to Scroll, she handed her an application form. "Hello, my name is Freya. His Excellency Carter from the Department of Justice wishes to acquire the information on refugees who passed the resident verification within the last week."

Due to her limited ability to derivative skills, His Highness ordered that anyone who wanted to inquire complex data must get consent from Barov first. As for individual data, one could ask Scroll at any time.

"Wait a minute!" Scroll glanced at the signature on the application form, summoned the Book of Magic, and showed the corresponding contents on its pages. "Alright. Give this to Mr. Carter."

"Thank... thank you." Freya carefully held the book that came out of thin air as if it was a demonic beast.

"Don't worry. It won't hurt you." Scroll could not help but laugh. Most people had such an expression when they saw the Book of Magic. "You do not need to return the book to me because it will vanish four hours later. However, according to the Constitution of Confidentiality, you aren't allowed to give it to anybody other than Carter."

"Yes ...My Lady."

Freya bowed and retreated. While she pushed open the door, Scroll saw a sea of people in the hall, and a chattering sound instantly rushed into her room, quieting down again when the door was closed.

This was a weekend, which was supposed to be a rest day, but the City Hall was still as busy as on workdays. Everybody was excited about the upcoming construction of Border Town, so they worked particularly hard. With the salary reward for overtime offered by His Highness, no one was willing to stay at home.

Scroll didn't understand His Highness's decisions. To her, there wasn't that much work to be done in the City Hall, and compared to the labors of miners and furnace workers, writing official documents, collecting data and making reports took much less effort - yet these were the main jobs of the City Hall. His Highness only had to give orders, and everyone would easily comply. There was really no need to raise the salary in this regard. Compared to most of the nobilities, His Highness appeared to be too benevolent.

Truthfully, Scroll didn't think His Highness Roland seemed like a real Lord. Yet, it was exactly such a person who led everybody to this stage, which was nearly a miracle.

She didn't come to this conclusion due to her respect and trust for Roland, but due to clear data; compared with one year ago, when only miners had a stable income in Border Town; the wages

of miners, furnace workers and handymen had doubled now, although they used to earn the least; some emerging occupations such as assemblers in the steam plant and operators in the acid plant had had their wages raised eightfold, and the number of workers was still on the rise.

The changes within the town itself were so obvious that if a person hadn't lived here one year ago, he might find it very hard to believe that such changes were possible.

Scroll touched the words on the document. She couldn't imagine how the territory would continue to transform under His Highness' leadership, but she firmly believed it would have a future full of hope and surprises.

"Miss Scroll." The wooden door was pushed open, and His Highness Roland's guard stepped in. "His Highness wants to see you."

...

When she returned to the third floor of the castle, Scroll saw that His Highness was organizing pieces of the manuscript.

"Would you like me to record these things?" Tying her black hair up, which was messed up by the cold wind, she stepped up and asked the prince.

"That's right. It took at least half of my brain cells to finish this

book." The prince massaged his neck, murmuring words that were difficult for Scroll to comprehend. "Even for the knowledge that was commonly used at the time, I could only remember them generally, and I even had to deduce several formulas myself."

Scroll had gotten used to this behavior. She ignored his weird terms, picked up the manuscript, realizing the letters on its cover were in an unprecedented orange color that formed the word "calculus".

She flipped through a couple pages, and found it impossible to understand what the book title meant. She then focused on memorizing its contents—compared to the equations she had learned previously, she found these new formulas didn't even have numbers, but a series of bizarre symbols, like a whole set of new characters. They looked like things only Anna and Tilly would be interested in.

"Right," Roland asked, "what's the average income of the residents here?"

"The minimum was 10 silver royals per month, and the maximum was 40," Scroll answered without stopping her memorizing of calculus, "but to calculate the average income I would need the Book of Magic, which has been used once today."

"That's alright. You can give me the statistical result the day after tomorrow." Roland waved his hand. "I need this number to determine the fee for water and heating supply. The collective heating supply project is about to begin in a week. On its completion, this place would be as warm as spring, even through

the longest winter."

A city without fear for the cold. This is one of the miracles that could only happen in His Highness's territory. "If I don't get extra work, I'll give you the result tomorrow."

"Tomorrow ...It would be nice if you could turn the Book of Magic into a storybook." Roland shook his head with a smile. "Or any book that Anna hasn't read."

"Storybook?" Scroll was slightly startled before quickly understanding his reasoning. "Tomorrow is Miss Anna's ..."

"Day of Awakening," the Prince nodded and said.

Chapter 411: The Vow

With no swaying candlelight or crackling burning fire, the room was made so warm and pleasant by the heater that one wouldn't feel cold even when only wearing thin clothes. The Stone of Light at the bed stand brightened the room—the stable and gentle yellow light shone on the bedsheets and carpet, producing a wonderful nostalgic scene.

Sitting at the bedside and listening to the occasional slight chirps from the caliducts, Roland felt as if he was in a dream. It was like he wasn't in a backward monarchy nor a modern society full of electronic products, rather somewhere in between... his childhood.

His childhood memories very much resembled the scene in front of him—everything was covered in a faint shade of yellow, whether it was a light bulb, a movie, or a developed photo.

The only difference was that Anna wasn't in his childhood memory.

At this thought, he turned and looked at the girl sitting at the edge of the bed.

She was reading a storybook. Her blonde hair on her forehead glimmering under light and her long eyelashes occasionally trembling, made her look extremely moving. Yet, the most extraordinary part was her sapphire eyes, which were still as blue as a clear lake even under the reflection of the Magic Stone. The

only difference from one year ago was that this pair of eyes weren't such a peaceful lake anymore.

Her existence alone made the whole picture vivid. Anna is not only a different color from the rest of this whole setting, but also a marker that separates my reality from memory. Seeing her assumes me that everything is real.

"What are you looking at?" Anna had already put down the Book of Magic and was staring at Roland. "Me?"

"Ahem..." Roland shifted his eyesight eyes subconsciously, but quickly shifted them back again. "Uh-huh...That's right."

After spending about a year together, the two of them had been quite familiar with each other. Roland wasn't as passive as he had been, and since they were alone in the room, he was more open about the emotions he had been holding back all this time.

They looked at each other and burst into laughter at the same time.

"Do you think my demand is a little too stubborn?" Anna shook her head and smiled. "Clearly everybody cares about me, but I pushed all of them away."

"Don't worry about it." Roland said with his hands laid out, "They were only surprised by your reaction at that time."

"If it weren't for the 'ancient methods' suggested by Miss Agatha, I wouldn't have made this request," Anna said, sticking out her tongue - a cute move that she rarely made. "But I assume other sisters would do the same. You'll be busy then."

Roland smiled resignedly and said, "I think they would only ask for a few more pieces of ice cream bread."

After learning that Anna was going to have her Day of Awakening, Agatha instantly contributed her experience gained in the Holy City of Taquila—according to the research of the Union, on the Day of Awakening or the Day of Adulthood, a witch needed to drain her magic power to decrease the influence of bite. Additionally, the witch's emotions were also very important - positive emotions as happiness and contentment would greatly increase her resistance. For some outstanding witches, the Union even dispatched personnel to fulfill their wishes on their Day of Adulthood.

After knowing this, Anna requested that Roland accompany her on her Day of Awakening.

"Thanks to Miss Agatha, I'm having a good time." She confessed. "I couldn't spend my Day of Adulthood with you, but I can make up for it on my Day of Awakening."

Watching Anna's sincere expression, Roland almost blushed. He cleared his throat, took out a thin book tied with a colorful ribbon from his back, and handed it to her. "A gift for your Day of Awakening."

The reason why he rushed to write down the advanced calculus knowledge that he remembered was to finish it before this day. To a witch, the Day of Awakening was more important than a birthday and could almost be seen as a rebirth. Roland had always had difficulty choosing presents for holidays, and this time was no different. After racking his brains, he decided to give Anna new knowledge as a present—Anna had a talent for learning and an appetite for new knowledge, so he chose her gift accordingly.

However, after receiving the book with orange cover, she didn't open it instantly as she used to. Instead, she put it down together with the Book of Magic. "Thank you."

"The storybook... Have you finished reading it?"

"Not yet." Anna slightly shook her head. "But I want to hear something special."

"Special?" Roland was slightly astonished.

"Yes." She said with a smile, "Your story—last time I fell asleep too soon while listening to it and today I hope to continue hearing about it."

"Does she mean the day when we lay in bed together?" Roland pursed his lips. He suddenly had an impulse to tell her about his true identity, and to not hide it anymore. "Do you still remember that I once told you I used to live in a big city? By a big city, I didn't mean Kingdom of Graycastle."

"I know."

"Huh?" Anna's reply was shocking to him.

"When I thought about it, I found those stories you told me couldn't have happened in the palace of King's City," she said with a smile. "Don't forget, I have repeatedly read through Chronicles of Graycastle."

"Is that so?" Roland hesitated for a moment. "I actually ..."

"You don't have to say anything." Anna stopped him. "You are hesitating, which means it's not easy to tell, right? Then don't. Besides, it's not hard to guess. I believe I'm not the only one who has this feeling. The closer we get to you, the easier to feel this way —you are different from everybody else." She paused. "What if... we take a bet."

"Bet... on what?"

"Let's bet how much I can guess about your life story."

Roland suddenly recalled a game he used to play when he was little: time capsule. "The game works like this: write down your words to the future on a note, put it into a can, and take the can out a certain number of years later... Although most of the cans would be missing, a few of them would be retrieved, and looking at the note you wrote years ago would give you an unspeakable

sensation."

He didn't ask about the wager. "It doesn't matter who wins and who loses, since she probably proposed it to comfort me, rather than to figure out my true identity." He must admit, among all the witches, Anna was the one who understood him the best.

"Deal." He nodded.

"Where did we stop last time?"

"I finished my study under the guidance of my mentor ..." Roland laughed. "Let's start from here."

When the light of dawn lit up the skyline, Anna peacefully passed through the first Day of Awakening since her adulthood.

Chapter 412: Sneaking Into The Fallen Dragon Ridge

The entire world was gloomy, from the sky to the land and sea.

Although the south central area of the Kingdom of Graycastle wasn't covered by endless snow, the impact of the Months of Demons was inevitable—the sun was hidden by an expanse of gray clouds which filled the whole sky. A pale fog rose from the earth, shrouding the land, rocks, and jungles. All that was revealed was the black and gray mountain peaks above the clouds, which stretched towards the southern end of the continent, and acted as the visual guide for Nightingale and her companions.

While flying in the sky on Maggie's back, Nightingale intensely experienced just how terrible the cold wind was in the open air. Even with a set of customized windproof clothes on, which were given to her by His Highness before they left, she could still feel the cold penetrating her body from her scarf and cuffs. In particular, her ears and fingers would soon get numb due to hypothermia. They often had to stop and rest for a while, making the normally half-day journey eventually extend to the next day—even flying at full speed.

"Here we are." Lightning approached her.

Nightingale peered out and realized the ridge had become much lower, as if it was sinking into the ground. A city built on the hillside emerged faintly from the fog, which should be their exact target—Fallen Dragon Ridge.

"Let's land." She patted Maggie's back. "Be careful and don't let anyone see us."

"Awh!" Maggie nodded, folding her wings as she glided down. The Mist soon enveloped the three of them as they landed. Nightingale found that the visibility around them was so low that she couldn't see clearly what was only 50 steps in front of them, let alone over a great distance.

This was a good sign for the witches—at least they wouldn't be easily noticed.

After entering into the Mist, the true colors of the world would be revealed, but she wasn't worried about running into the church's Judgement Army due to the thick white fog.

"You just wait here, this shouldn't take long," said Nightingale.

"His Highness asked me to keep a lookout from the air." Lightning shook her head.

"And he asked me to be the emergency contact in case you kidnapped the target. Coo!" Maggie transformed into a fat pigeon, crouching on the top of the little girl's head.

"His Highness gave some meaningless commands," Nightingale thought. "In that case, let's go."

Suddenly, the world became black and white—the fog disappeared, or transformed into something else, which no longer hindered her vision. All of a sudden, the view became clear. The dark city wall was 200 meters away, extending out of the mountain side, and linked the city and the mountain like a dome. The stone wall was much shorter compared to the outer wall of Longsong Stronghold, and there were no sentry guards on it.

Nightingale went to the side of the wall and found the entrance through the curved lines. She stepped forward and realized that she was already on the other side of the city wall.

The city was half the size of Stronghold, and it was more like a small town in this area just outside of the mountain cliffs. But Fallen Dragon Ridge was located within the rocky mountains, and the Lord's castle built on the hillside could be seen from far away.

Nightingale assured that Lightning and Maggie were following her into the city, and then she went straight towards the castle.

This mission wasn't new to her and she was very proficient at it.

When she served old Gilen, it was a common assignment to infiltrate into other nobles' mansions and castles. Most of the buildings were similar in structure, and the owners always liked to live in the most spacious house right in the center. Back then, she was unable to go in through walls freely and could only conceal herself—while carefully avoiding any possible traps and the God's Stones of Retaliation—before stealing the letters and documents hidden in the cabinet.

Now with the help of the Mist, she could easily do these things, since the lightless black hole presented by the God's Stone of Retaliation, embedded at the corner of castle's aisle, seemed as attractive as the moon hanging in the dark sky. The hidden traps could be seen clearly, as their twisted contours were like creeping earthworms, and she could easily destroy them after passing through the walls. While under the influence of her ability, Nightingale was perfectly free to move—the walls, doors, and roofs were just inconsequential to her.

Walking into the largest house at the top, she found her target.

Although they had never met before, Nightingale identified Marquess Spear Passi, the Lord of Fallen Dragon Ridge, at first sight because a magic blue light was rotating in her body, which was the only color visible in the world of the Mist.

Sitting in front of a desk with a quill in her hand waving back and forth, the Marquess seemed to be writing something. She was about 30 years old with wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, and the silver curls of hair and plain robes she wore made her look older. Nightingale examined the room carefully and found that there was no God's Stone of Retaliation or trap, and that Parcy's only weapon was a delicate and luxurious short crossbow hidden inside her sleeve.

After leaving a mark on the side of the window, she dissolved the Mist and revealed herself.

"Greetings, Marquess Spear Passi."

Shocked by the unexpected voice, Spear Passi raised her head swiftly and saw Nightingale. She quickly calmed down and asked, "Who are you?"

Nightingale remembered the scenario of her first meeting with Prince Roland—his first reaction was to try to escape and she had to stop him by using a dagger, which in hindsight was really funny.

"I'm Nightingale and I'm from Border Town of the Western Region. As you can see, I'm a witch."

"I thought so, as no one can come here without an invitation, except a witch." Spear Passi pretended to be calm, as she moved one of her hand slowly into her sleeve. "You should knock on the door before coming in."

"Then I'd be welcomed by your guard, not you." Nightingale laughed softly. "Don't worry. I don't intend to hurt you. I just want to have a talk—so you won't need that crossbow inside your sleeve."

This surprised Spear Passi and her face got more serious. "You know quite a lot." She took her hands out and crossed them in front of her chest. "Well, why are you here?"

"I bring you a message from Lord of Border town, Guardian of the Western Region, the fourth prince of the Kingdom of Graycastle,

His Highness Roland Wimbledon." Nightingale bowed slightly. "He's creating a new order of the world that allows witches to live together with average people peacefully, and he hopes you can assist him."

"Prince... Roland?" Marquess frowned. "The incompetent nobility who was always laughed at by everyone?" With an absurd look on her face, she said, "This is ridiculous, Lord of Border Town? He's just a rebel banished to a waste land!"

"Timothy was the real usurper," Nightingale said, "and Prince Roland will soon dethrone him. But that's beside the point... His Highness needs your magic power to strengthen the ability of a witch. Would you mind making a trip to Border Town?"

Chapter 413: The Incident

Spear Passi was silent for a while before saying, "Are you threatening or inviting me?"

"I'm inviting you, of course," Nightingale said. "His Highness doesn't believe in coercing witches. In fact, I don't either."

"In this case, I refuse," Spear answered without hesitation. "If he really needs my help, he can bring the witches to the Fallen Dragon Ridge to visit me for the ritual of the nobility. No need to send someone sneaking in my castle. Of course, if a witch attracts the church's attention I can't ensure her safety."

The answer was just as Nightingale had expected. It was difficult to get a stranger to agree to such a difficult request. Generally, there were two means of handling the situation—coercion and inducement, but she didn't want to perform either option. Marquess Passi was the Lord of the city and would be the guardian of the realm once promoted. However, His Highness did not plan to flatter her in any way. Instead, he would withdraw power from the nobles. According to His highness, this was called the centralization of authority. In this instance, she would be degrading herself in the eyes of nobility if she was at His Highness' service.

In regards to following Roland, to create a brand new world and defend in the Battle of Divine Will, she would not believe it from word alone.

"I understand." Nightingale pouted. "In this case, I shall leave."

"Hold on..." Spear looked surprised. "That's all?"

"I'm responsible for bringing His Highness' messages to you. Now that the message has been delivered and you've given me your answer, my task is complete." She grinned. "Were you expecting me to tie you up and bring you back with me?"

"How did you know about my ability to channel magic?" Marquess hesitated. "Did you talk to the witches who planned to go to the Fjord Islands?"

"Yes. The leader of the witches is Lady Tilly Wimbledon. She's currently in Border Town, fighting the Demons with her brother." Nightingale shrugged. "His Highness heard about you from her."

"They didn't go to the Fjords?"

"No, they didn't know His Highness had gained such a firm foothold in the Western Region. They only got in touch after settling down on Sleeping Island." She gave a brief outline of the alliances on both sides. "Just like you, Lady Tilly was invited to the Western Region by His Highness."

"Prince Roland really established a system of coexistence for witches and ordinary people in his territory?" Spear frowned and asked. She was having a hard time believing it.

"Not only that, he also evicted the church from his territory." Nightingale smiled. "Currently there are more than 10 witches living in Border Town. The locals are accustomed to their existence. I'm not lying about this."

Marquis stood up and poured her a cup of tea. "Can you tell me more about it? How did he do it?"

"If you want to know." Nightingale turned and sat at the table. It might not change her decision but it was never a bad thing to deepen her understanding. Nightingale decided to tell her about the Witch Union His Highness had built, the war with Duke Ryan and the political run after the recovery of Longsong Stronghold. If Spear could understand the witches' situation, hopefully she would not resist too much when His Highness eventually unified the Kingdom of Graycastle.

A sudden rush of percussion was heard.

"This is..." Spear looked at Nightingale in shock.

Nightingale opened the window. It was Maggie squatting outside. "Danger, coo! Lightning discovered an accident, coo!"

"What happened?"

"A troop of Judgement Army soldiers is rushing towards the castle, coo!" The pigeon patted its wings and said, "There are at least 20 people, coo!"

"The Judgement Army from the church?" Nightingale turned around and frowned. "Did you summon them?"

"No... I didn't have an appointment with the church Priest today," Marquis looked particularly puzzled, "could it be your whereabouts have been exposed?"

"That's impossible." She shook her head. "Unless the church has the ability to monitor every bird in the sky."

"That's weird..." Spear murmured, "if they were coming for me, they wouldn't need so many Judgement Warriors. It's almost the entire force!"

"What are you waiting for? They're almost at the entrance!" A golden figure darted through the window and landed lightly beside Nightingale. It was Lightning.

"I'm not sure about the situation, I suggest that you avoid it," Nightingale said, "or get the guards to stop them outside the castle and find out why they're here before proceeding."

"This is my castle. Where would I hide? Don't worry, these people can't enter without my permission. Otherwise, I would not have been able to protect the witches." Spear sighed. "However, this meeting may have to end here... If you're not in a rush, I think..."

Before she could finish her sentence, a series of chaotic footsteps were heard just below the castle. The sound of swords fighting could be heard clearly in the castle, echoing in the mountains. Marquis expression changed. "Who let them in?! Guards!"

Spear called a few names but no one responded from outside. The footsteps were approaching closer and closer.

"It looks like they're here for you." Nightingale made a gesture towards Lightning, indicating she should leave first, "You still have time to leave, we can protect you."

"No, I'm not going anywhere! This is my territory; how could they be so presumptuous..."

She hardly finished speaking when the door was broken down by a group of heavily armed Judgement Warriors. The Lord was fully surrounded by warriors holding up their swords and shields.

Nightingale hid in the Mist, taking a step back into the corner where it was both convenient to escape and suitable for observation. She noticed that neither Lightning nor Maggie left. The former was peeking her head out from the top of a window, the latter was simply squatting on a beam, arranging her wings.

"These two brats are totally reckless. I'll get His Highness to discipline them well when we're back..." She shook her head helplessly and shifted her eyes to the Judgement Warriors. Every one of them was wearing the God's Stone of Retaliation. The dark holes were intertwined and totally obscured Spear. She could only

hear the Marquess' angry rebuke. "Redwyne, are you crazy? You let them into my castle without permission?"

"Of course not, wise sister." A man's voice raised within the crowd. "Father was wrong to give the title to one of the Devil's minions. I'm simply correcting his mistake."

Chapter 414: The Conspiracy

"What... What are you talking about?" Spear asked in disbelief.
"The devil's minion? This is a complete fabrication!"

"Fabrication or not, His Reverence will draw his own conclusion," Redwyne raised his voice and said. "Just because you managed to deceive Father, it doesn't mean that you can deceive everyone else! Soon, people will know who you really are. You belong in hell!"

"Did you make all these up?" Spear's tone suddenly became icy cold. "Or someone else put you up to it? I think the latter is true. After all, father chose me because you and our third brother were completely useless."

"Shut up!"

Nightingale heard a rattle and the Marquess groaned in pain.

"Enough, bring her to the church for questioning," someone said, "but she's still a member of the nobility before her verdict, so maintain your etiquette."

As Spear Passi was carted away, the Judgement Warriors followed right behind her, and soon there were only two people left in the room. Nightingale couldn't see their faces clearly because of the effects of God's Stone of Retaliation, but she could tell that one of the voices belonged to Redwyne, the man who spoke to the Lord. If she was not mistaken, this person seemed to

be Spear's younger brother.

"You're doing really well, Mr. Redwyne; perhaps, I shall address you as Earl going forward."

"So that's it, Mr. Rosad?" Redwyne could not hide his excitement. "I really can inherit the title of Earl and become the Lord of the Fallen Dragon Ridge?"

"Of course. As long as you abide by our agreement, you may even go further," came the reply.

"So, what should I do next?" he asked eagerly. "Can I move into my sister's room? She won't leave her cell, right?"

"Spear Passi will soon be hanged to death as a witch in the square as per the terms of our cooperation." The other man hesitated for a moment, and continued, "As for what to do next, I suggest you relay this incident to all her ministers, knights and men and divide the rights of the Marquess."

"Do... do I really have to do that?"

"If everyone can benefit from the incident, your position will be much more secure, which will help our future plans to proceed smoothly," Rosad said. "If you're still confused, I can always assign a priest to you. He's very good at handling government affairs and can always advise you on any questions you may have."

"Yes, please," Redwyne replied quickly.

"It'll be very helpful for us if you can hold the Lord's position, so the church is happy to help with these issues." His peals of laughter filled the room.

After the men left, Nightingale emerged from the Mist, followed by Lightning and Maggie.

"We're in trouble." She stared at both of them and said, "How could the church show up at precisely the right time and place?"

"I thought they said her brother found her true identity and revealed it to the church," Lightning said, her eyes flashing with excitement. "Now we have something to do."

"Why didn't they find it out earlier? Why right now? I feel like something's wrong." Nightingale frowned.

"No matter what, we are not going to watch them execute Spear." Lightning held her head up high and said, "We must save her and annihilate the church!"

"Annihilate it, coo!"

"The confidence of this blonde girl has inflated since defeating the demons. This is not a good sign." Nightingale shook her head and responded, "We can't defeat the church for the time being. They must have participated in this conspiracy, so if we removed

these people, Spear would naturally return to her position as Lord. This might be an opportunity for us. If we sneak her out, she'll probably agree to go back to Border Town with us under these circumstances."

"Awww, we're not fighting the church?" Lightning asked, disappointment in her voice.

"Battling will be the very last resort since they outnumber us and have a large amount of the God's Stones of Retaliation. It's pretty risky to try routing them all at once." Nightingale contemplated for a moment and said, "I'll go to the church first and find out what's going on."

There was one concern that she didn't mention. Spear Passi might be thinking that His Highness was the one framing her if the situation wasn't explained clearly. That, Nightingale knew, should be avoided at all costs.

"What about us?" the little girl asked.

"Just be ready to meet me outside."

...

The church of the Fallen Dragon Ridge was located on the outskirts of the city. It was small and had a prayer hall, a residential area for the believers, and a three-story tower surrounded by a wall with only one exit. None of these obstacles

posed a problem for Nightingale.

She had familiarized herself with the entire area by the time all of the faithful had departed in the evening. Although there were many more God's Stones of Retaliation here than in the castle, Nightingale still managed to find her way. There was a huge God's Stone placed right in the middle of the hall to stifle any magic in the room, and the same was true for some corridors. However, she could always take a detour or even hop over the floor.

Nightingale found the place where Spear Passi was imprisoned in the basement of the tower. She didn't seem too hurt, just a little frustrated. She intended to rescue the Marquess during the middle of the night.

Nightingale snuck back into the tower after sharing her plan with Lightning and Maggie. She ascended to the top floor and hid in a magnificent room.

"This," she thought, "would be the Priest's room. He would probably spill the beans if he found me here with a dagger."

When the bell of the Fallen Dragon Ridge struck nine, swung open.

She drew out her dagger stealthily but didn't attack. She judged from the footsteps that there were two people.

"What an unexpected joy!" said a woman's voice. "Little did we

know that Marquess Spear is actually a witch. It seems that we need to tweak our plan."

"Uh... Lady Saint," Rosad answered with a very respectful tone, "isn't it more convincing if she's a witch?"

"It's different from before, because according to the will of the Supreme Pontiff, any new witch who comes to realization shall be handed over to be executed in the Holy City as soon as possible," The woman said. "As for the execution, let's not hang her, but burn a masked death-row criminal with a similar build."

"Yes," Rosad answered. "But why did His Holiness set such a troublesome rule of delivering a witch to Hermes?"

"I've no idea, but according to my superiors, it's simply returning to tradition," she replied.

"Returning to... tradition?"

"You don't need to know too much. Just fix the matter at hand." The Saint said brusquely. "I'll have to head towards the Redwater City once everything is done here."

"Understood," Rosad answered crisply.

"Who is she exactly? How come even the Priest is so respectful towards her? It seems they didn't know that Spear Passi was a witch before they captured her. Could it just be all a conspiracy to

seize the throne of the Fallen Dragon Ridge?"

Nightingale couldn't help but come out from her hiding place and looked at the lady while hidden in the Mist, only to find that she was not wearing a God's Stone of Retaliation. The magic power inside of the Saint was as bright as a fluorescent light in her world of black and white.

"She's a witch!"

"Who's there?" She responded in an instant, and a dazzling silver light shot towards Nightingale!

Chapter 415: The Fight

Nightingale's years of fighting experience kicked into gear, and her body immediately responded before she could even think.

She leaned back instinctively, and the silver light grazed her cheek. Even in the Mist, she could feel the immense power of the light—extraordinarily scorching and intense. After dodging the sudden attack, Nightingale tucked into a roll and distanced herself from her opponent.

"What... what's happening, Lady Saint?" Rosad asked frantically.

"It seems like a rat has snuck in." The witch licked her lips. "Find somewhere to hide and protect yourself."

"You mean... there's a witch here?!" The priest's expression suddenly changed. "I'll summon the Judgement Warriors!"

"No need. I haven't hunted a witch for a long time. How could I let someone else have this priceless opportunity? Just stand by and watch me."

Nightingale was observing the so-called Saint during the conversation. Although she knew that the church was probably secretly raising their own witches, it still broke her heart to see the proof of this theory. This witch had entirely owned by the church, she may even have a high rank, and it sounded like she enjoyed hunting witches and did not see herself as one of them.

Nightingale could not help but remember the determined eyes of the witch who attacked them at the harbor outside the King's City and stabbed Wendy.

These people were no longer witches since they had chosen a completely different path.

With this thought in her mind, Nightingale did not hesitate to pull out her revolver—although she hated this kind of battle, she had no choice but to kill to stop the killing.

"Where do you come from?" The Saint tilted her head and stared towards where Nightingale was standing. "If the priest can't see you, you have the power to conceal yourself; if you can dodge my attacks, you have been trained for battle or you have fought in many wars. Either way, it's quite rare for wild witches like you."

"Wherever I come from is none of your business," Nightingale said coldly. She noticed the ribbon that blindfolded the opponent, and it was what a blind person would do. The "silver whip" in the Saint's hand was still curled by her side with its tip raised like a snake, waving at her.

Only magic power displayed color in the Mist. Was she using this strange whip to locate her?

"Maybe you are not aware, but the church has crowned a new Pope who is compassionate, forgiving, and believes that even wild witches deserve to be saved. As long as you are willing to serve the

Lord, the church can cleanse your sins off and accept you as a Pure Witch," the Saint said with her hand on her chest. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for you. If you didn't come alone and are accompanied by other fallen witches, you can all go to the Holy City of Hermes together to seek your rebirth."

"Wow, that sounds great." Nightingale chuckled. "But if awakening as a witch is a sin, and you had a way of cleansing it, why would you establish this law now instead of helping all my lost sisters from the beginning? Do you think I'm a toddler who has never heard a blatant lie before?"

She inhaled deeply and narrated. "I have not sinned!"

As she said this, Nightingale broke out of the Mist and pulled the trigger, and the barrel erupted in flames with a thunderous roar.

The "silver whip" immediately flicked upwards and blocked it off the Saint, spewing sparks everywhere. Then, the tip of the whip relaxed and tossed a twisted metal nugget onto the ground which was the bullet that Nightingale just shot.

This thing could block a revolver!

"Oh?" Her opponent raised her eyebrow. "What kind of weapon is this?" Her voice cooled down suddenly. "I've changed my mind. It looks like you'll be dying here tonight."

The silver light lunged towards Nightingale once again, this time

it was divided into dozens of whips that completely surrounded her.

Nightingale used her Mist to swiftly back away. Unlike common objects, the whips containing magic power were immune to the Mist, so she couldn't pass through them and could only try to avoid them. However, her enemy's range of attack was far too big, and the silver light struck by her side. She felt a slight numbness on her shin and she lost her balance, crashing onto the ground. The magic whips pierced into the ground behind her and pulverized the stone floor into dust. If she had been hit directly, she would have immediately lost her fighting power.

Nightingale ignored the wound on her shin and shot all the bullets in her gun at once from the ground.

The silver whips recoiled and turned into a spinning band of light, blocking all the bullets.

She knew she had no time to reload her bullets in the Mist and that once she wasn't able to hold off her enemy with her revolver, she would be in huge trouble—it was too cramped to distance herself from her enemy, and not being able to dodge any attacks would only shrink her range of movement. She pulled out another gun in a panic, shot all the bullets randomly and ducked into the Mist, and fell two stories down through the floor.

"She escaped!" The Saint screamed. "Summon the Judgement

Army to lock down the church, and send guards to the Marquess' cell as well since the witch might be here to see her!"

"Escaped?" Rosad glanced around him, not seeing any damage in the doors nor secret exits. "Through what?"

"The walls, the ceiling, or the floorboards—her powers go way beyond invisibility. There isn't any magic power left in the room!" The Pure Witch gnashed her teeth and said, "Do exactly what I told you to, She's injured and won't make it too far. Tell all your men to put on the God's Stone of Retaliation bolts!"

"Yes!"

After the priest left hurriedly, the Pure Witch immediately collapsed helplessly to the floor, her hands trembling powerlessly.

Damn, what kind of weapon is this?

Her abilities were all-powerful, and her defense power, the magic light that could block any attack, was seen as the strongest among Pure Witches—no sword or bolt could ever penetrate it.

In order to strengthen her powers, she was constantly using her magic light. After more than ten years, she was able to carry such an immense amount of magic power that hundreds of arrows were futile, and she had never exhausted her magic power due to blocking anything.

However, her opponent's attack drained her magic power instantly, and she was no longer able to even maintain her abilities. She felt an extreme fatigue that she hadn't experienced in years.

"I must get my hands on this Fallen Witch, dead or alive," she thought vengefully.

Chapter 416: Retreat

Nightingale followed the path she had scouted out before, passed through three rooves, and landed straight in the dungeon that the Marquess was held.

Spear Passi heard the sound and stared up with wide eyes.
"How... did you get in?"

Nightingale raised a finger to her lips as a sign for silence and limped out of the steel door. Judging from their clothing, the two guards in the pathway were probably followers of the church. She used the Mist to instantly move behind the two men and slit their throats with a dagger—they would never have expected an attack from within the dungeon, so they didn't even turn their heads as they lay dying.

After returning to the dungeon, Nightingale finally had a chance to examine her wound.

The wind-resistant pants that Soraya made for her were cut open, and blood was gushing from a wound on her shin that was half an inch deep. Her enemy's magic whip must have scraped through the pants and cut through her flesh, but thankfully it had not damaged any bones. If not for the sturdy coating on her pants, she would have been injured even more seriously.

"You're hurt," Spear said with a frown.

"It's not too bad. We have to leave before you turn into a corpse."

Nightingale did not tell the Marquess about the Saint's plans of taking her to Hermes, for it seemed just as bad as dying, or even worse. "They had no idea that you were a witch before they captured you, so it must be the church's conspiracy to gain control of Fallen Dragon Ridge."

"How about my brother..."

"He's probably already become the church's puppet. There's no time to waste, so I'll explain to you on the road." Nightingale tightly tied a sash right above the wound. "Where is the God's Locket of Retribution?"

The Marquess pointed at her neck. "At first, they only tied my legs with a chain, but then they replaced it with this."

Nightingale's heart immediately sunk upon seeing the metal ring as thick as her thumb—this kind of God's Locket of Retribution was made by stuffing magic stones into a metal tube and sealing it with a special technique, making it practically impossible for someone to undo it.

"Do you remember where the locking device is?"

"It's inside the dungeon near the entrance, where they brought me to be locked."

It was obvious that after discovering the Marquess' real identity, the Saint decided to use the strongest restrictions that could

almost trap any witch except an Extraordinary.

She would have to remove this contraption in order to take Spear into her Mist and escape.

"Let's go to the first dungeon," Nightingale said decidedly. "Come with me."

She fought against the stabbing pain in her shin, returned to the fallen guards, took their keys, and opened the cell door.

Suddenly, the tolls of ringing bells broke the silence and echoed throughout the tower, which made her heart race.

"That's the church's alarm," Spear said with a panicked expression.

"I knew they would come eventually," Nightingale whispered. "Our only chance of surviving is to move faster than our enemy."

The alarm might have actually helped her because all the men in the basement would swarm towards the only entrance at once, making it easy for her to eliminate them together.

She descended on them with her Mist and aimed her gun at these men. After her bullets pierced her first target, they immediately struck her second, splattering blood everywhere. The God's Stones of Retaliation that they wore served as clear targets in her black-and-white vision, while her invisibility rendered the men clueless

about where to attack. After two rounds of shooting, there was not a single living guard left in the dungeon.

However, she knew that these were the lowest-rank followers and that an armed Judgement Army was headed their way soon. If she couldn't take off the God's Stone of Retaliation before their arrival, it would be very difficult to escape.

"Come here!" She quickly spotted the locking device—a metal instrument resting against the wall with two rusty clamps stretching outwards, resembling a terrifying torture device.

Spear pressed her neck against the clamps, and Nightingale fastened the device onto her and furiously turned its handle. With the help of the pulleys, the clamps pulled in opposite directions and created an opening in the God's Locket of Retribution.

At the same time, the sound of the Judgement Army's armor rattled near the cell door.

"That's them right there!" Someone yelled.

"Take aim—shoot!"

"Let's go!" Nightingale brought Spear into the Mist, but small black holes shot towards her and tore her Mist apart.

There were God's Stones of Retaliation on the bolts! Nightingale felt a cold sweat break on her forehead as she and the Marquess

became completely visible to the Judgement Warriors—it was clear to see that these men were trained very differently from regular followers. They shot their first round of bolts all throughout the passageway to close off their exit, and only half of the men participated in the first attack.

Meanwhile, the other half waited for the witches to expose themselves.

After spotting their target, the second wave of arrows flew towards them.

Nightingale heard the buzzing of arrows behind her and pulled the Marquess in front of her body, yelling. "Duck!"

A searing pain spread like fire through her back as she was hit by countless arrows, but she didn't stop running.

As they rounded a corner, Nightingale tasted blood in her mouth, probably from biting her lip in pain before. "Are you OK?"

"I'm... I'm fine," the Marquess said blankly. "Did, did you just block the bolts for me?"

"If you were shot, you would be gone for, but I might make it." Nightingale reached behind her and found that none of the arrows had pierced through Soraya's windbreaker—although her back hurt like it was on fire, there were only bruises, and no stone powder had entered her body.

The Judgement Warriors hurried towards them. They probably did not expect the two witches to survive the second wave of bolts without a shield, so they were a considerable distance away.

After escaping the binds of the God's Stone of Retaliation, Nightingale grabbed Spear and entered her Mist. She rushed upwards through the floorboards and soil to the outside of the tower, took a bamboo tube from her bag, and pulled the string on its end.

A blinding red light shot out of the tube into the sky and exploded into a shower of sparks that looked like stars dotting the sky.

When His Highness gave this to her, he kept boasting about how one flare would summon a thousand troops to her aid. Right now, she didn't need a thousand troops and only prayed that Maggie could see her signal.

Soon, a giant shadow descended from the sky as Maggie landed next to the tower, her large body crushing its walls and her wings fanning away the fog around them.

"What... what is that?" Spear Passi stared in awe.

"That's my friend." Nightingale had Lightning fastened the Marquess onto Maggie, used the last of her strength to crawl onto her back, patted her body, and said, "Let's fly."

"Aooooo... aoooo..." Maggie roared at the incoming Judgement Warriors, flapped her wings, took off, and disappeared into the night with the two witches.

Chapter 417: Strike Back

On the Fallen Dragon Ridge, Lightning expertly set up a tent big enough for four beyond the wind's reach.

Nightingale sat by the fire to warm herself. She rolled up the cuffs of her pants and found her calves stained with blood. The places hit by the Saint were swollen. She had not felt it at the time with adrenaline coursing through her, but now, as she relaxed, she struggled to lift her legs. If Maggie had not come to her rescue, she probably would not have been able to run any further with carrying the Marquess.

It was extremely dangerous to move in the Mist in her current condition. The changing lines inside of it were staircases lined with sharp blades waiting to cut her to pieces if given the opportunity.

"Let me help you, coo."

Maggie took first aid supplies from a big backpack. Besides cotton and a small bottle of rubbing alcohol, she found an herbal remedy prepared by Leaf, the medicinal mainstay of the Witch Cooperation Association.

Try as she might, Nightingale could not stifle her gasp with accompanying grimace when the pungent alcohol was poured over her wounds. If His Highness hadn't mentioned that it could kill the bacteria that caused the demonic plague, she would think this was some type of torture.

To Nightingale's great relief, the scorching burn was relieved quickly by the herbal preparation. As soon as her wounds were bandaged, she felt much more comfortable.

"Your back..." the Marquess said in a low voice, "Is it alright?"

"What's about her back?" Lightning crawled into the tent with a bundle of firewood.

"To save me... she was shot by their bolts," Spear said forlornly.

"No big deal. It's like taking a couple of punches." Nightingale twitched her mouth. "It's not a problem as long as I don't sleep on my back tonight."

"It's better to apply some herbal medicine on it," Lightning said while fiddling the branches in the fire pit with the sparks flying. "Leaf's medicine, not only can stop the bleeding, but also is very effective for bruises."

"Lay down on me, coo." Maggie sat down and patted her lap. "Let me apply the medicine to your back, coo."

Seeing the serious look in the white-haired girl's eyes, Nightingale could not disobey and acquiesced without argument. "Alright."

She took off her clothes with her hands covering her chest and reclined in Maggie's lap. The Marquess let out a muffled gasp.

She knew without looking that her smooth back was now mottled with darkening red bruises. "But it just looks scary. Since witches have strong self-healing capacity, these wounds will heal after two or three days," she thought, shrugging it off the best she could.

During this tender evaluation and treatment, Nightingale coughed twice and said, "Marquess, do you have any plans for the future? Your brother Redwyne, deluded by the church, has betrayed you. Actually, before that military coup, neither he nor the church knew you're a witch." Then she briefly repeated what she had heard in the tower to the Marquess. "They worked in collusion to deprive you of your title. Even if you aren't a witch, you'll be put to death as a devil's minion. It'll be easy work for the church."

"If they dare to murder a marquess," Spear said, gnashing her teeth, "I'll make Redwyne and the church pay the price!"

"The church's deeds are far beyond your imagination." Nightingale shook her head. "They kill even kings without blinking. Think of the Kingdom of Everwinter and the Kingdom of Wolfheart."

Spear was stunned for a moment and then opened her mouth to ask, "Does the church really dare to swallow all four kingdoms? I've only heard about it from merchants of neighboring countries, but most of the nobility in the King's City thought it ridiculous."

"The nobility in King's City also said Roland Wimbledon was a rebel king." Nightingale shrugged. "If His Highness guesses right, conquering the four kingdoms is only the first step in the church's plan, but unless you join the Witch Union, I can't tell you the conspiracy behind it. Besides, the church must spend some time plotting this military coup and most of your men should have already swung to Redwyne who has promised them more profits. If you want to take back Fallen Dragon Ridge, you can turn to His Highness for help."

"Will he really help me?"

"Of course, it's our solemn duty to wipe out the church," Nightingale said with a trace of a smile touching her lips.

Marquess was silent, and she looked like she was hesitating to say something.

"Believe me," Nightingale said, recognizing the Marquess' hesitation. "You're free to leave the Western Region anytime you want. His Highness never compels anyone to stay."

"Is he really establishing a place where witches and ordinary human beings live together?"

This was the second time she had asked Nightingale this question, and again Nightingale answered proudly, "Yes, His Highness' territory is a place like that. It's the witches' Holy Mountain."

In the firelight, the expression seemed uncertain on Spear Passi's face. After quite a long while, she nodded slightly and asked, "Are we going to set off tomorrow?"

"Not yet," Nightingale and Lightning spoke with one voice. Then they gazed into each other's eyes and burst into laughter.

"The local church will try to report to Holy City what happened here, so in the following two days, we must catch all the pigeons sent out by our enemy," Nightingale explained to the Marquess. "After that, Maggie will carry you to Border Town. I have some other pressing demands here."

She remembered what the Saint had said in that room atop the tower: she would leave for Redwater City soon after the military coup.

Apparently, wherever the Saint went, an undercurrent of tension soon followed. Troubles big or small were sure to find His Highness. If she could impede the Saint, she would not only sabotage church's plan but also collect a bounty of information from the Saint.

Nightingale took a deep breath and made a plan to kill every member of that church platoon, but she was not sure whether Prince Roland would agree to her plan. If he insisted on her giving up the plan and going back, she would do as he wished.

...

Three days later Maggie, who had already sent the Marquess on to Border Town, returned to Fallen Dragon Ridge bearing two witches from the Sleeping Island on her back.

"Why are you here?" Nightingale asked, the surprise evident on her face.

"Prince Roland sent us to help you," Andrea said, gracefully hopping off the big bird's back, doffing her hood and giving her blonde hair a nice shake. "We'll get two pieces of ice cream bread in return."

"Wiping out a church platoon, you can never do that without me!" Ashes said with a smile.

"His Highness said you can do what you've planned, but take safety into account first, coo." Maggie changed back to a girl and continued, "He said he was waiting for you to return to the castle."

"Really..." Nightingale mused, suddenly aware of warmth in her heart. "I get it."

"So how many are there?" Ashes raised her eyebrows slightly. "I heard there's a witch among them?"

"I don't know the exact number yet, but there are at most 20 Judgement Warriors along with their servants and some believers," she said in a measured voice. "You take care of the

others and leave the witch to me."

Chapter 418: Finish The Fighting

They had been on the ridge for a week when Lightning detected the platoon at the north gate of Fallen Dragon Ridge.

As Nightingale had expected, the church's emissary delegation was composed of 25 fully armored Judgement Warriors, who were riding stallions at the head of the platoon. There was a transport corps of around 100 mercenary fighters and believers walking behind the Judgement Army.

Among them, there were two coaches. She assumed the Saint was in one of them.

The five witches secretly followed the platoon, as it headed toward Redwater City.

According to the plan, they would initiate the attack when the platoon was out of the monitoring area and thus would be unable to call for backup quickly.

Nightingale quietly watched a coach in the platoon from her mist and vaguely saw a silver light of magic power coming out through the distorted silhouette of the carriage.

If Nightingale acted alone, she could probably kill the Saint of the church, but it was not guaranteed that she could kill all of the enemies here. But now, with the help of the witches from Sleeping Island, it was highly possible that they would be able to block the news in the Southern Territory.

Once this platoon was eliminated, Hermes would not know anything, at least until next spring. And by then it would be very difficult for them to investigate what had happened to the emissary delegation.

Nightingale did not like killing, but this time it was an intentional decision.

It would lighten the burden on His Highness and help to defend the witches' Holy Mountain.

She would not regret it.

When the emissary delegation entered the forest, Nightingale saw a dark shadow coming close.

It was Maggie. She folded her wings and swooped down, roaring. Horses suddenly neighed in fright and went off uncontrollably. All the people were shocked, dumbfounded and only stared goggle-eyed at the scene.

But the giant beast did not burst into the crowd to bite and stomp on them as they had expected. Instead, it spread its wings just over their heads and flew away close to the ground, leaving a storm behind it. The strong wind made it hard for them to open their eyes. Suddenly, a person jumped off the beast's back and landed on the ground.

"Enemy attack!" the Judgement Warriors shouted among the emissary delegation.

Hearing this, the believers began to recover themselves, drew out their weapons and struck at the unknown enemy at the center of the platoon.

Nightingale's vision filled with black and white lines. They were fully covered with lightless black holes which could protect them from ordinary witches, but not from Ashes the Extraordinary.

She cut all the believers within her range in two, at their waists, like reaping wheat. All the people around her fell swiftly. She used an ordinary iron sword instead of her symbolic heavy sword, in order for Maggie to carry one more witch besides herself. The iron sword quickly cracked and broke during the fight. She seized the weapons dropped by the enemy, a halberd, a stick, sometimes an iron hammer or a cutlass. Anything in her hand became a lethal weapon.

Blood splashed and bodies were torn apart. In the middle of the platoon, Ashes cut them in two all by herself.

In the rear part of the platoon, the mercenary fighters could hardly offer the middle section any help because they had their own difficulties.

Andrea kept skipping through the forest like a fairy. She used the branches and trunks of the trees to cover herself and shoot arrows every time she changed position. Every one of her arrows would

hit someone between his eyebrows and every one of her shots was to kill.

In less than ten minutes, the whole platoon was a mess. Screams, cries and fighting noises resounded in the forest.

Nightingale joined the fight immediately. She dashed through her mist, closely following her target, who was her only target in this fight, the Saint of the church and the witch hunter. The coaches were drawn by the frightened horses. They ran wildly for a long way before the horses finally calmed down, but then they did not return to the platoon. Instead, they left the main road and burrowed into the forest in two different directions.

It seemed that the Saint had already noticed that among her enemies there was a tough opponent, an Extraordinary. For most witches, an Extraordinary with God's Stone of Retaliation was unbeatable.

Unfortunately, she could not escape from Nightingale's control.

Nightingale had already spotted her position earlier on. The one in the other coach was likely a high-ranking priestess or priest.

Nightingale left it to Lightning and Maggie.

Despite the fact that the Saint's coach tossed heavily on the bumpy road in the forest, the coachman kept whipping the horses, looking like he was urged by someone to speed up.

Nightingale approached. In order to shoot fatally every time, she only fired when she was less than ten meters behind the target and in line with it. She aimed at the four Judgement Warriors following the coach and pressed the trigger to kill them one by one. The Judgement Army immediately split off at the sound of the gun, but the distance now was still only several steps for Nightingale in her mist. Further, their full armors were doing more harm than good in a fight against large caliber bullets. The bullets became more harmful to the human body after going through these deformed, cracked armors.

After getting rid of the four Judgement Warriors, she pointed her gun at the horses.

As the two horses fell down, the fragile wooden carriage promptly flew off from the force. It then hit a tree trunk and immediately fell apart.

Through the flying pieces, a person wrapped in silver light rolled out. Nightingale aimed and shot without hesitation, but the light formed by magic power seemed to have consciousness and blocked the bullets one by one.

She moved away to reload a new cartridge.

"Traitor!" the Saint shouted angrily, charging towards where Nightingale hid.

This time, the situation was different.

They did not fight in a small room anymore. Now every step Nightingale took would cost the Saint more than ten steps to catch up and the effective range of a revolver which was around 50 meters was much bigger than the area a witch could affect with her ability. The Saint's "silver whip" could hardly reach Nightingale while a bullet could put the Saint to death anytime.

At this distance, merely one or two out of five shots could hit the target, but luckily Nightingale had enough time to reload new cartridges and keep aiming and firing.

After five cartridges, the silver light dimmed out. One shot hit the Saint's left shoulder and another went through her stomach. She could no longer stand. She staggered a few steps, and then fell to the ground.

Nightingale was not in a hurry to approach her. She went back to the place where the carriage had fallen apart to pick up a God's Stone of Retaliation before she walked to the Saint. During the fight, she had kept moving around the carriage so it would be easier to search the site afterwards.

The moment Nightingale appeared beside the blood-covered witch, she suddenly stretched out her right hand, the only part she could move now, only to find that her silver light could not pierce her enemy as she wanted.

"You damned demon, the gods will put you on trial!" she said, gritting her teeth, blood was spewing out of her mouth.

Nightingale pointed the gun at her chest expressionlessly and replied, "Really? I'll wait for that day."

Then she pressed down the trigger.

Chapter 419: Faith

After the smoke caused by the battle dissipated, the forest returned to silence.

The witch's long braids had unraveled, and her hair spread like white petals over her body.

Blood streamed down her back and quickly formed a dark red puddle, slowly immersing into the ground and melting the cold, hard soil. After that, the air was filled with a smell of iron.

Nightingale squatted and untied the blindfold on the witch's face. She found the face looked unexpectedly young, probably similar to her own age. However, the scars by her eyes destroyed her overall beauty—her eyes looked like they had been repeatedly burned by red-hot iron, and her skin was red and wrinkled, so she had lost the contours of her eyes.

This was undoubtedly caused by men. Nightingale gently touched the wrinkled scars; as for whether she suffered these wounds before becoming a witch or after serving the church, no one would ever know. However, this was no longer important because from now on, she couldn't hurt any more witches and wouldn't suffer any more torments.

After searching the Saint's body, Nightingale found a letter, a seal and an emblem in the pocket of her robe lining. The emblem was a circle split by a cross with a clenched fist in the center.

She carried nothing else—no gold royals or jewelry.

"Perhaps she never enjoyed anything in her life," Nightingale couldn't help but think.

"Hey, look at what I caught." Lightning's voice sounded from the air. She looked up and saw the little girl carrying a struggling man, whom she threw onto the ground.

The man groaned in pain and rolled around, trying to get up, but he was hog-tied, so all he could do was to twist around helplessly.

The man's outfit revealed that he was probably the Priest who was sitting in the other carriage.

"Where's Maggie?"

"She's guiding Ashes to chase the runaway Judgement Army." Lightning walked over to the Saint. "This is the witch trained by the church?"

"Uh-huh," Nightingale said softly. "She won't ever hunt us again."

"From her appearance, it's difficult to believe that she saw us as enemies who must be killed..." The little girl sighed.

"If not for the church, none of this would have happened." Nightingale turned to glare at the captive man. When he saw the

witch lying in a pool of blood, his eyes immediately widened, and he tried to say something but couldn't because of the cloth gag in his mouth.

She took out the cloth. "Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

"Ahem... you, you've killed the Pure Witch of Bishop Tayfun, reckless devil! You'll sooner or later be hung by the church at the city gate and left to the crows!"

"Even if we didn't kill her, being caught by the church is no better," said Nightingale, "and compared with this, you'd better worry about yourself first."

"Even if I die, I'll have the salvation of God, and you guys will only sink into Hell and be tortured forever!" He yelled.

"That's why I have to block his mouth," Lightning said.

Nightingale stuffed the cloth back into his mouth. "Let His Highness deal with him. He said that Iron Axe is very good at interrogating such kinds of people."

...

By the time Maggie brought over the two witches from Sleeping Island, it was already afternoon. Ashes jumped down from the back of the beast and landed steadily next to Nightingale. " You're

not hurt, are you?"

"Everything went well," she said. "How about you?"

"Obviously, not a single man escaped." Ashes laughed proudly.

"Is she dead?" Andrea landed and looked at the Saint. "I thought you'd keep her alive."

"The enemy was a witch, so hesitating would have been extremely dangerous," Ashes twitched her mouth and said. "If I were you, I wouldn't keep her alive either."

"Gee, you have no mercy for your own kind."

"She isn't our kin, but a puppet controlled by the church," the Extraordinary said casually. "Besides, sometimes our own kind can be even crueler than others. I've never seen demonic beasts or demons imprison and torture people for several years."

After saying that, she took off her blood-stained gloves and offered her hand to Nightingale. "Your actions and performance were amazing, and you did the right thing in this situation."

"..." The latter stared at her for a moment before holding her hand. "Thank you."

"Who would have thought that someone like her would comfort

me," Nightingale thought. "She probably didn't want me to feel guilty for killing a witch."

"I think this victory is worth celebrating," Lightning said.

Maggie agreed with a "Coo!"

Andrea rolled her eyes, reached out her hands, and placed them on top of the others'. "I have to clarify that if it were only your hand, I wouldn't touch it, so this's for Nightingale's sake."

"OK, I get it," Ashes said, raising her eyebrow.

Then, the five witches raised their hands to the sky, looking like an unwavering tower in the cold wind.

...

Next, they needed to collect the information carried by the emissary delegation and hide the traces of their battle. After properly dealing with these issues in the forest for two days, they arrived back in Border Town three days later.

After landing in the castle backyard, Nightingale was immediately surrounded by her sisters.

"I heard you were hurt. Where is the wound?" Nana asked.

"She has been waiting for you for a long time. Why did you come back so late?" Lily asked, annoyed.

"Does it... still hurt?" Lucia asked urgently.

"This batch of herbs was made especially by me. They can't only stop bleeding, but also calm swelling, so their effect should be pretty great," Leaf said with a smile.

"How could you be so careless to scurry into the church alone! You might not be this lucky next time!" This was Wendy's voice.

"It's alright as long as she can return safely." Scroll chimed in.

Seeing their concerned faces warmed Nightingale's heart, and she didn't understand how the Church's witches lived, but she knew what it was like to belong to the Witch Union. There was no doubt that this was worth devoting everything to.

Then, she saw His Highness Roland.

Lightning jumped into his arms and stuck to him like a gecko.

Maggie also flew onto Roland's shoulder, rubbing his cheek.

Although Nightingale wanted to do this too, she knew that she wasn't a child, so she held back the impulse to embrace Roland, walked up to him, and said with a smile, "I'm back."

"Uh-huh, I've waited for you for a long time." The prince smiled his familiar smile. "Take a hot bath and get some rest. I put a few bags of honey grilled dried fish in the office drawer."

"OK, then I'll go help myself."

Nightingale smiled.

She reassured herself that she had done the right thing.

Chapter 420: The Lord's Response

That night, Roland held a magnificent banquet at the Lord's castle.

Since they not only rescued Spear Passi but also captured a Priest from Hermes, it was technically the Witch Union's first unprovoked attack on the church.

As the five witches who had participated in the battle walked on to the stage, the hall erupted into applause, and even Roland, who rarely drank, drained two glasses of Evelyn's chilled white liquor.

Although it was only a small triumph, the Months of the Demons were long and stressful, and he wanted to take this opportunity to help everyone relax.

When Roland stumbled into his office the next morning with a raging headache, Nightingale was already waiting for him, sitting cross-legged on his table.

"Don't you need more rest?" he asked with a smile.

Ever since he agreed to let her attack the emissary delegation, he had been worrying about her—even if he knew she was in a spacious area and could use the Mist to remain invincible, he still fretted about accidents. Afterall, this wasn't daily practice, but a true battle of life and death. Now seeing her energetic and vital, he felt much better.

Nightingale swallowed her dried fish and said, "Of course I don't. I'm in a great shape right now."

As soon as Roland returned to his seat, she jumped off the table, walked to the back of the chair, and hugged him. "One more day of rest is one more day without seeing you."

The prince was slightly startled.

"I actually wanted to do this yesterday in the castle garden... but now isn't such a bad timing either," Nightingale whispered into his ear.

...

She did not let him go and disappeared into the Mist until she heard the footsteps outside the door.

"Your Highness." A guard shouted. "The Lord of Fallen Dragon Ridge, Marquess Passi, is here to see you."

"Send her in." Roland cleared his throat and adjusted his posture.

Spear Passi walked into the office, bowed, and sat in front of his desk. "I've thoroughly considered your proposal."

"What do you think?" He poured a cup of tea for her.

While Nightingale, Ashes, and others were battling against the church, he had also been busy with showing the Marquess around the town and negotiating with her. Roland briefly told her the crisis that the kingdom faced, the origins of the church, and the threats of the demons, as well as his future plans.

When Spear heard about the church's origins and their reasons for hunting witches, she was so shocked that her eyes widened to the utmost. If not for the testimonies of Tilly and Agatha, she would have never believed that witches once had ruled the entire Barbarian Land, but her attitude changed greatly afterwards.

"Repealing feudal power, universalizing laws and administration institution, prohibiting the inheritance and sale of titles... I can accept these requests, but..." She paused. "I'm just curious. Do you really plan to spread this to all the territories?"

"Yes. If we don't do this, Kingdom of Graycastle will be nothing but loose sand," Roland said, nodding. "Before our final enemies arrive, we must gather as much power as possible."

"Your plan will offend all of the nobilities," said Spear slowly, "especially the part prohibiting the inheritance of titles—if I'm not mistaken, the Lord of a territory is also a title. Doing so will confirm your reputation of the 'rebel king'."

"That's why I don't expect them to back down voluntarily," he said, knocking on his desk. "Before the fateful Battle of Divine Will, the nobility's discontent is not my priority. I don't have to kill

them all, either. As long as these people accept my new terms, they may even be able to keep their territories, just not their feudal power—I believe they'll make the right decision."

Centralization of authority was only effective when all the power was held by a few people, so if local authorities had too much power, they would threaten this centralization and even his position as a ruler. Unlike one year ago, the town now had the ability to undergo a revolution. After this step was completed, he would be the only ruler of Kingdom of Graycastle in a real sense.

"You seem to have made up your mind." Spear sighed. "If I don't accept them, your army will probably overturn my ruling anyways."

"I desperately need manpower for my plan," Roland said earnestly, "especially someone with experience in governing a city. Like I said, you won't lose your territory, and you can proudly reveal your identity as a witch to your people without fear of the church."

The Marquess was silent for a while. "I also have a request."

"Please, go ahead."

"After you take back Fallen Dragon Ridge for me, I don't want anything to change," she said bluntly. "I can only fully support you when Timothy is no longer the king."

"What a clever answer..." Roland thought. "She avoided giving a strict refusal and gave herself some room for changing her mind. Basically what she meant is that in order to earn her support, I need to prove that my plan of unifying the Kingdom of Graycastle isn't just empty talk and that I'm truly capable of doing it."

"It's a deal then." He didn't think much of the Marquess' secret calculations. If his attack in the spring went well, it might be easier to overturn Timothy than retrieving Fallen Dragon Ridge.

"Oh, by the way, Your Highness." Spear hesitated. "The witches are attending class tonight, and I'm wondering if I could join them..."

Roland was a bit surprised. "Those are all very basic beginner courses. You probably won't learn anything new."

"I'm intrigued by their calculating methods," she said, shaking her head. "I've never seen anything like them before."

"Is she talking about the Multiplication Table or algebraic equations?" He mused. "Of course, as long as you're willing to join the Witch Union."

...

After lunch, Iron Axe brought him some good news.

"He's willing to talk?" Roland was slightly surprised. "That soon?"

According to Nightingale, the captive Priest was quite stubborn.

"Not everyone has a will of steel, Your Highness," answered Iron Axe seriously. "The Sand Nation has some unique interrogation methods that barely damage the body but destroy the mind, even making some people view death as a relief. He has already lingered longer than most people."

"That's right," he thought. "Professional spies not only have extraordinary willpower, but are also trained not to crack under any interrogation, but no one in this era has received this kind of training."

"Take me to see him," said Roland. "I have quite a few questions for him."

Chapter 421: The Interrogation

The prison of the town hadn't changed much since he arrived one year ago.

His mass infrastructure development did not extend to this place, and although the houses and roads above the ground had been renovated, the prison below still reeked of decay. Moss grew on the stone walls, and muddy water dripped down the stairs.

The only difference was that the cells held very few prisoners.

Due to the expansion and development of the territory, anyone who was willing to work was able to find a job. The scoundrels who were unwilling to change were sent by Roland to the mines, where they were whipped into shape.

Since Anna had wrecked the cells at the bottom of the prison, and there was no need to repair them, the entire lower floor was sealed off and abandoned. Roland followed Iron Axe to the middle of the third floor and saw the captive Priest—the only criminal on this floor.

The man was not hanging on a torture rack nor beaten to a bloody pulp, which completely defied Roland's idea of an interrogation. He was huddled in the icy corner of his cell, and although his clothes were all intact, he seemed completely lifeless and pale with hollow eyes without focus.

"Is he alright?" Roland asked quietly.

"It's not an issue, Your Highness," Iron Axe answered with a bow.
"If you have any questions, you can ask him directly."

The prince nodded. The Sand Nation's interrogation methods were indeed unique, but he was not interested in the specifics or the humanity of Iron Axe's process, as long as it got the job done. He cleared his throat, sat down on the long wooden bench near the cell, and asked the Priest through the bars, "What's your name?"

"Are you the Fourth Prince of Kingdom of Graycastle... Roland Wimbledon?" The man's expression changed. "Look... look at what you've done. You've unleashed the demons' powers."

"His Highness is asking your name," said Iron Axe coldly. "If you don't want to undergo last night's punishment again, then cut the crap."

The Priest's face froze, and after a short pause, he lowered his head and said, "My... my name is Campus."

"I heard you're from the Holy City of Hermes?" Roland glanced at the man. "Who was the witch traveling with you? Was she also from the Holy City? What was her role in the church?"

"Her..." Campus seemed hesitant and was silent for a long time before answering, "Her name was Aurora, and she was one of Master Tayfun's Pure Witches. She didn't take any positions in the church."

"Tayfun?" The prince pondered for a while upon this familiar name.

"He's one of the three Archbishops of the Holy City, in charge of the church's external affairs. His position is second only to the Supreme Pontiff." The Priest explained.

Roland suddenly remembered that he had met this person before—at a ceremony in King's City. That day, King Wimbledon III organized a big coming-of-age celebration for Tilly Wimbledon, and Tayfun was the Bishop sent by the church to the ceremony. In his memory, Tayfun seemed like a benevolent old man with a caring and forgiving smile, as if he had nothing to do with anything evil in the world.

"What's a Pure Witch?"

Campus hesitated once more, but after Iron Axe threatened him again, he grudgingly responded. "Pure Witches are witches who are raised by the church and directly managed by Bishops and the Supreme Pontiff, so I don't know too much about them."

Roland scratched his ear to signal for Nightingale's confirmation and learned that the man was not lying.

"How many people know about the church's hidden witches?"

The Priest shook his head. "Master Tayfun only told me about

this two years ago and ordered me not to tell other believers, so... I'm not sure how many people know."

"The church is obviously very secretive about raising Pure Witches, which at least means they aren't publicly holding a double standard," thought Roland. "This is definitely good news." This finally confirmed his suspicion and gave him another piece of evidence to hold against the church—if the believers found out that the sermons they received were all false and that the church was secretly raising the very enemies they were taught to fight under their noses, how would they react?

"What was your motive in sabotaging the Lord of Fallen Dragon Ridge? Why did you want to take her back to Hermes?"

"I don't know. My only mission was to monitor Aurora, so only she knows the exact motive. There was a change of plans because Aurora discovered that the lord was actually a witch, and the new Pope thus ordered us to send all captured witches back to the Holy City to be purified."

"Purified," Roland snorted. "Do you actually believe that? If purified witches... no, Pure Witches are sinless, why would the church keep their existence as a secret?"

"Because... because some believers aren't devoted enough, so this's the only way for now..." His voice trailed off, and he eventually closed his mouth.

The prince sneered. "Where did you plan to go after leaving

Fallen Dragon Ridge?"

"Redwater City."

"After that?"

"Impassable Castle."

"Anywhere else?"

"Just these three cities." The Priest responded numbly, having given up resisting after disclosing the information about Pure Witches. "Master Tayfun didn't tell us when to return, so we were going to stay at Impassable Castle awaiting new orders."

His answer matched the letter found on the witch's body. "Why these three cities?"

Campus shook his head.

It seemed that he didn't know much since for the church, he was probably just a monitor for the Pure Witch. Roland stroked his chin and thought, "Fallen Dragon Ridge is in the Southern Territory, Redwater city in the center of the kingdom, and Impassable Castle between the Northern and Western Territories, so they have nothing in common, and they aren't important passes or intersections. Even if the church wanted to overturn the Kingdom of Graycastle, they wouldn't start with these cities."

If he had to name a similarity between them, it would be that they all lay on the border of the Western Territory—a thought suddenly sprang into his mind: Was he actually the person the emissary delegation was targeting at?

...

The interrogation didn't stop until evening. Roland collected his information and stood up. When he was about to leave, he noticed that the Priest was sitting motionless against the wall, as still as a corpse, neither begging for mercy nor cursing in fury. This surprised him greatly. "Aren't you asking what I intend to do with you?"

"You tortured me into confessing all this... and God will bear witness," Campus said with his eyes closed. "God is my final judge, not you. It doesn't matter what you'll do to me."

"Your Highness, give me another night with him," said Iron Axe. "I'll turn his attitude around."

"Not necessary. This is enough." Since the Priest had already confessed everything, Roland had no interest in continuing to torture him. "He'll be judged, not by God... but by the people."

Chapter 422: Public Trial

Shortly after winter began, a wooden stage was built in the center of the square. It was the first of its kind for the people of Border Town. It wasn't for a theatrical performance but rather to conduct the first public trial.

A notice had been issued two days prior. On the day of the trial the stage was surrounded by a large crowd. The square area was much larger after the extension but it still wasn't large enough to accommodate the entire community. There were scattered snowflakes falling from the sky, but everyone was too excited and completely ignored the wind and snow.

The atmosphere suddenly reached extremity as Roland appeared on the stage.

Watching the audience at the bottom waving their arms at him, he was emotionally touched. Once he had been almost a laughing stock in the eyes of the nobility and he'd had little influence on his subjects. Now, after just one year, the situation was reversed.

With shouts from the crowd, the Priest Campus was pushed onto the stage. His facial expressions changed a little while facing the crowd. Perhaps this parade was common for the top management from the church. They were accustomed to worship from the believers, and could easily influence the lives of these people with a single word or action, Roland thought. Except that this time, he probably wouldn't go through the brilliance of the past.

With excitement in their eyes, the witches from the union walked up to the wooden stage. They had always been slandered, hunted, unjustly treated and tried. But this time the roles were reversed. Witches were the victims, accusers, and jurors, and the trial object was the church. They had always imagined such a scene, but never expected that such a day would come so quickly.

Roland waved his hands and the people quieted immediately.

"Greetings, my people."

"The purpose of today's gathering is to reveal a shameful crime. The church has hidden the truth from the very beginning. I wouldn't have discovered this shocking news if the Priest of the Holy City had not been captured in a rebellion case."

Roland had been thinking about how to reveal the church's crime effectively for the past two days. The rebellion case of Fallen Dragon Ridge shouldn't be the key point, because the story from a small town far away from them wouldn't gain their attention; the Battle of Divine Will and the Kingdom of Witches shouldn't be mentioned, for the story of a few hundred years ago was irrelevant for them and it might cause panic if it revealed the existence of demons. He needed to share something that they cared about in order to arouse the indignation of the masses.

In other words, it had to touch their hearts.

With no doubt, the witches who lived here shared the same daily lives with the people.

"The church has claimed that witches are the devil's minions, persons that are neither clean nor fortunate, but in fact, both the Pope and the Archbishop have been sheltering witches in a surprisingly large scale! This was said by the Priest himself." Roland faced the Priest and said, "Am I correct?"

After a long silence, Campus replied, "Yes."

Discussions broke out in the crowd.

"Your Highness, is he really a priest from the Holy City?" someone asked.

"Of course," said Roland, showing an expression of praise in the direction of Echo. "He was sent to the Kingdom of Graycastle in the name of the church as a Saint, and all the documents he's brought reveal his identity!" Roland pointed to a small table beside the wooden stage. "Priest's robe, badge, circular letter, all can be used as evidence."

The crowd was liable to doubts about these, so he would let Echo ask first and then answer them accordingly. Furthermore, these items were real, he didn't need to fake it.

"My people, come back to what I said before," continued the prince. "Take note of the term I used—sheltering! Yes, they gather female infants and orphans from all over the country to the monastery of the Holy City and these women are treated as animals. Only a few turn into witches, and proceed to further their

training. The rest simply become trinkets for Church believers."

"No, these ..." Campus raised his head and opened his mouth, but he could hardly make a sound.

"In order to get more witches, they shelter female wanderers in the name of relief, and even collude with Black Street Rats to steal infants! Please think, my people, if there were a church in this town, you wouldn't only lose Miss Nana, but also a family member of yours could be missing too. They claim that the witches are evil spirits, seduced by demons, and drive believers to persecute these innocent women. Could you tolerate if Miss Nana was framed by them?"

"Never, Your Highness, never!"

The atmosphere of the square was hot, and people shook their fists, expressing their anger at the Priest.

"Miss Nana can't be evil, and she is the one who cured my injury!"

"I've know her since she was little. She was my daughter's classmate in Karl's college."

"I would have been killed by demonic beasts if not for her healing. She is an angel to the First Army."

Roland paused for a moment so the crowd could voice their dissatisfaction, then he continued. "So, why did they do that?"

The question caused a commotion among the subjects.

"Because the church needed witches to maintain their rule!" Before they could make more speculation, the prince said, "As you know, the witches' abilities are varied and incredible! Besides Miss Nana's healing and Miss Lily's elimination of demonic plague, they have many other abilities that can improve our lives. The water supply equipment in our town was made by Miss Anna and Miss Soraya. The flintlocks used by the First Army and the steam engine that pulls the miner's truck, all these are gifts given by the witches. Our town wouldn't have achieved any of this without their contributions."

"But everything has two sides. Like a sword, it can be used to fight the demonic beasts or used to kill the innocent. The church is using the witches' abilities to hurt good people. And those who don't obey them are regarded as God's outcast. In fact, the top management of the church is committing a heinous crime which is recorded in the doctrine, and they completely disregard that their God is watching them."

"My dear people, if your children were to be kidnapped by the church and used to hurt you after being trained. If they became the church's whip and blade, how sad that would be!"

Roland turned around, walked to the front of Campus, expanded the long roll of paper, and asked loudly, "Do you have anything else to say about the accusations recorded on this paper?"

"These... are all true." Popping his eyes, the Priest looked as if he couldn't believe he had uttered these words. "I... admit guilt."

The masses became very angry.

"I hand over the right of judgment to you all!" Roland said loudly while the crowd was agitated, "For this evil, your choice is..."

"Kill him!"

"Kill him!"

"Kill him!"

Everybody was shouting the same words, soon there was only one voice left in the square.

In Border Town, with scattered snowflakes floating above, the people made their choice.

Chapter 423: The Connection

Spear Passi solemnly signed her name at the bottom, after she had read both contracts several times.

One was the Memorandum of Unification and the other was the Memorandum of the Witch Union.

The first contract agreed that Spear would lead the people of Fallen Dragon Ridge in promising allegiance to Roland Wimbledon after Timothy Wimbledon's rule had been overthrown, and in response to the request of the new king, she would surrender her power. In return Roland would guarantee her position as the Lord of Fallen Dragon Ridge and other rights. The memorandum divided them into three categories which were, human affairs, administrative affairs, and finance. Although such a categorization was new, it was easy for her to understand what her daily routine was to include.

Spear thought about the second contract for a long time before she had made up her mind, as of this time the union was to serve Prince Roland without any doubt. She didn't want to join Prince Roland so hastily, he had only just occupied the corner region of the Kingdom of Graycastle. But, the content of the contract was attractive, and she vaguely sensed that the unique method of categorization would be helpful in managing her territory.

Fortunately, the constitutions of the Memorandum of the Witch Union were very loose, more like a formal consensus, and didn't even limit the whereabouts of its members. She consulted with the prince regarding this, and his reply was that the members could

leave any time they wanted.

"I've signed it."

Spear placed the two elegant parchments on the table, but Roland didn't respond. He looked at the empty side of the room as if thinking about something.

"Your Highness?"

"Ah..." He blinked his eyes as if he had come back from somewhere. "Let me have a look at it."

He wasn't this absent minded before the negotiation, and it seemed that ever since the trial yesterday, His Highness has been confused. This was difficult for her to understand. The trial was an absolute success and the people were on his side and cheering him. Before that, Spear had never thought that ordinary people would support a person of nobility. She thought that she and they were in two different worlds, and that nobility needed neither the understanding nor support of the people. But, she had changed her mind a day ago. After seeing the people surrounding the square, waving their fists, shouting with a strong voice that shook the sky and land. She then realized that they might contain a power that she had never felt and it was more powerful than a noble.

Besides, the decisive judgment displayed by His Highness was another one of the reasons why she had signed both contracts.

Regardless of whether or not he's trying to protect the witches, it's a kind of good faith to punish rebels who are against his royal power. Considering this, she would respond accordingly.

However, His Highness doesn't seem satisfied... Is he regretting being publicly against the church?

Spear was clear that the church was not an enemy they could easily deal with.

It's better to figure it out agreeably since it's related to the direction of their future co-operation. She hesitated, and then mentioned it diplomatically.

The prince was astonished for a while after he had heard this, and then he shook his head and smiled. "I have never regretted fighting against the church, after all, they're enemies that must be defeated from all points of view."

"So why..."

"I just have some mixed feelings."

"Mixed feelings?"

"I feel a little embarrassed, although what I said was truthful and what I disclosed were the crimes committed by the church." He shrugged, "It seems as if I'm not a qualified politician."

Politician? What's that? Like an astrologer devoting himself to studying stars, is a politician someone devoting himself to studying politics?

His Highness interrupted before she could keep asking. "I'll keep these parchments. I heard that your ability is related to the control of magic power?"

"Yes." Spear stopped questioning. "To be more precise, it's to extract the magic power of one witch for other witches to use. Of course, I can also retrieve and recover my own magic power for the purpose of consumption. As this process doesn't have a big impact on the outside world, I can repeat the process anytime in the castle."

"How did you find out you have such an ability?" the prince asked curiously.

"After my awakening." The Marquess answered, "I've no idea how other witches discovered their abilities, but I could feel it, and the feeling was like... you suddenly had an extra limb."

"Interesting description." He nodded thoughtfully. "You should know that the reason I sent Nightingale to Fallen Dragon Ridge is to give you an invitation."

"You need my ability." Spear paused a moment and bowed. "It's my honor to serve you."

Anyway, since there was no way for her to return to Fallen Dragon Ridge at the moment, it was better for her to see what a prince does, despite the fact that she had only been in town for a week. She had already realized that the town was different from others, it was a secluded land that was far away from the center of the Kingdom, but as energetic and lively as the capital. As a Lord, she was curious.

What made Spear more surprised was how the life of the witches here was completely different from what she had imagined. The prince didn't control them, but rather allowed them to live freely, and this was evident from his waiting for the return of Nightingale—he obviously hoped that she could return early, but still agreed with her requisition.

His Royal Highness didn't treat them as servants.

Some nobles sheltered witches because of their beauty. She thought he would have been more unscrupulous because His Highness openly recruited witches, but he was surprisingly self-disciplined.

Were the rumors true? Was the prince both prurient and incompetent?

She had more faith in him and she felt ridiculous for thinking it at the same time. When she thought back on it, she felt what Nightingale had told her was totally true.

...

She left the castle with the prince and they came to a yard at the back of the town, where Spear saw two other witches.

"This is Anna and this is Mystery Moon." Roland introduced them. "The Magic Power of Mystery Moon is considered to be low level, but the consumption of her magic power is astonishing."

"I'm obviously at a middle level!" Mystery Moon protested.

"Among the awakened witches," the prince added.

Mystery Moon kept quiet immediately.

"Do you want me to connect their magic powers?" Spear looked at Anna. "Does she have the strongest magic power in the union? I suggest that you invite a few more witches to come over. The stock magic power is related to their age, even if there's a difference, it wouldn't be big."

"This is just an experiment," His Highness said, rubbing his chin, "and if it works, I'll ask them to come over."

The Marquess nodded and summoned a passage of magic power—it was a sphere shining with blue light, quietly floating in the air. Under her control, two thin tentacle-shaped threads stretched out from the sphere to Anna and Mystery Moon.

"You'll feel weird in the beginning, so just relax and it'll be fine," Spear explained. "I'll fail to transfer your magic powers if you resist it."

Anna was shocked when the tentacle touched her chest.

What's... happening here? It seemed that the tentacle was connected to a solid metal cube instead of the rotating magic orb. It was so big that she felt like an ant standing at the bottom of it, and she could only see over its top by raising her head.

Chapter 424: The Dawn I

How is magic power with such a form possible?

Spear "touched" the edge of the metal in disbelief, which was her unique way of sensing magic power. As soon as the passage was connected, she could see, touch, and even smell the magic powers of witches, as if she were entering their bodies.

Hard and cold, the surface was as smooth as a mirror, reflecting every detail of the tentacle-shaped thread. When the antenna-like cord of energy reached the cube, it swiftly bounced back.

"Relax." Marquess comforted her. "They're harmless." She wasn't sure whether her ability could affect this metallic cube since Anna's magic power seemed unable to flow.

After trying a few times, the antenna finally stuck to the cube.

But there was no transmission of magic power.

"What's going on?" Nightingale noticed something was wrong.

"I've never... transported magic power of this kind. It's too massive and doesn't look like the air that can be transferred." Spear felt her throat dry. "As soon as the channel is connected, the magic power should have been absorbed by the 'pivot'."

"I'll try to charge it with magic power." Anna suddenly spoke.
"The same way as using the Sigil of God's Will."

"Be careful not to expend too much each time." His Highness nodded.

What was the Sigil of God's Will? Spear found that she'd heard several new terms since she came to this little town.

As she was pondering, the magic power in Anna's body suddenly transformed.

The perfect mirror was broken, and the surface of the metal rippled. The liquid without light rushed into the pipe and then became a floating ball as if pushed by something.

She then felt some weight.

Different from the cyclone of magic power, the liquid was very heavy. As it flew into the pivot, it was like putting in chunks of iron ingot. Spear found that she was consuming an increasing amount of magic power.

It was rather unbelievable. Prior to this, she could easily exhibit her abilities for half a day. Now at this rate, she might not be able to last a few hours.

Out of desperation, she drew out another cord from the pivot, connected it with her own body, and sustained the channel using

Anna's magic power.

When the light ball was full, the metal cube in Anna's body was still in its original form, as if the magic power it lost was only a very insignificant portion.

Spear really wanted to take back what she had just said. She coughed twice. "Hem... now the channel can supply enough magic power for Miss Mystery Moon. What do we do next?"

"Stick to it." His Highness Roland handed Mystery Moon a copper cylinder. "Now show us what you can do."

"Ok." Mystery Moon took a deep breath, held the copper object in her hands, and closed her eyes.

All of a sudden, the Magic Power began to flow furiously.

Spear saw that the metal cube in Anna's body gleamed, the fluid in the pivot came out, and filled again; the entire channel kept on trembling. It looked as if it would be torn apart by the turbulent magic power. The Marquess had sweat on her forehead. She felt as if she was standing in front of a tsunami.

On the other side, Mystery Moon had a frowned forehead and red cheeks. Obviously, she was also under the impact of the fierce waves. But considering Spear was the one transferring the power, Mystery Moon must be under tremendous impact. Even so, she didn't stop using her abilities, and the rapidly consumed magic

power was the proof.

These girls were monsters!

Spear didn't know how she managed to last to the end. When the magic power in Anna's body was drained, Spear felt she could barely stand on her own feet.

"Fi... finished." Mystery Moon opened her eyes and excitingly held up the copper cylinder. "I made it!"

"Well done." Roland carefully clamped the copper object with a pair of wooden tongs, as if it was a red-hot iron.

"What's this?" the Marquess asked. "It looks exactly the same as before."

"A strong magnet with ever changing magnetic force," the prince replied. "I don't know whether it'll form an access with the earth while being held in a person's hand. If so, it would discharge. So we'd better be cautious."

Spear blinked her eyes. "What?"

Nightingale smiled. "Don't mind them. This is such a topic that only Anna can participate in."

"Then... what can it be used for?"

"Let's try it out." Roland put the copper cylinder into a black iron machine standing in the middle of the yard. Judging from the silhouette of the machine, it looked like a giant iron tube. It had a wooden pedestal at the bottom. An iron pole as thick as an arm stuck out from the middle. The prince looked at Mystery Moon. "Turn on the switch. If it works, it'll bring a whole new source of power to the town."

Mystery Moon nodded. She held the wooden handle on the machine and pulled it downward with effort.

Sparks burst out from the downside of her hands, making a crackling sound. To Spear's surprise, the iron pole in the middle began to rotate rapidly. The pole must have been as heavy as one or two people. How could it rotate so fast?

"Have we... succeeded?"

"Not yet." The prince found a chair and sat on it. "It depends on how long it can work."

Spear noticed there was something glittering in Roland's eyes as he looked at the plain rough iron machine. It was as if he was looking at a piece of shining jewelry.

Three days later, Roland pushed open the door to the backyard of

the North Slope Mountain. Upon hearing the sound, Anna stopped her work and rushed to greet Roland. She couldn't conceal her excitement. "It's still working."

There was no need for her remark though. The prince also heard the noise made by the operating electric motor. To him, this noise was almost as euphonious as the sounds of nature. Because it meant that the variable magnetic core cylinder, being filled with Mystery Moon's magic power, was still operating properly. As a whole new power source, it had shown its practical use.

Roland came to the center of the yard and saw that Mystery Moon was sitting beside the electric motor. With her hands on her chin, she looked at the black machine, feeling bored. "Your Highness, when you said my abilities are full of potential, did you mean this thing ? It doesn't look any different from a steam engine."

"This is only the first step to change the world," Roland said beaming. "You'll be able to see what changes it can bring to our little town soon enough."

Every step forward in the history of the human race was related to the utilization of energy. To some extent it could be used to measure the level of a civilization's advancement. From steam to electricity, from electricity to nuclear, the breakthrough in energy would usually boost the industrial production. The variable magnetic core cylinder filled with Mystery Moon's magic power was such a kind of new energy. It resembled a super large battery and transformed magic power into electric energy. Its small manufacture scale limited its application, which meant it couldn't

lead to an energy reform. But as a supplement to the steam engine and internal combustion engine, it was still a perfect power source.

Besides, with the growth of Anna's magic power, it still had the potential to be used in other areas. And when Leaf gained control of the Impassable Forest and obtained the massive magic power supply, the potential was unimaginable.

"The name 'variable magnetic core cylinder' is too long," Roland said, smiling. "Let's call it Dawn I."

Chapter 425: The Utilization Of Energy

On the afternoon of the fifth day, the electric motor stopped working.

In other words, a single Dawn I could provide energy for a large-scale electric motor to work for five consecutive days. If an electric motor didn't run continuously, then its work time could be extended. When the magnetic effect of the copper column was lost, it could be recharged with magic power, which was purely low-consumption, recyclable, and pollution-free energy.

Its flaw was also very obvious—recharging it would exhaust all of Anna, Mystery Moon, and Spear's magic powers. So if the three of them produced a Dawn I per day, it could only sustain five electric motors (non-stop). At the moment, Anna was irreplaceable for the fine machining and steel smelting in the little town. Roland had tried his best to distribute most of the manufacturing work to ordinary townsmen, but without the machine tools produced and maintained by Anna and her supply of materials, the production of revolving firearms and bullets would instantly bog down in stagnancy.

Furthermore, Anna was also essential for the production of the 152 mm Longsong Cannons, new-style light weapons, and Roland's other new ideas. So he wouldn't want Anna to strain her magic power on charging the batteries.

Roland leaned back on the wing chair and deeply sighed.

There were two solutions for this problem. First, increasing the duration of Dawn I. To this end, they needed greater resources or more witches to supply magic powers. Unfortunately, the Marquess' passage was just strong enough to transfer Anna's magic power and the process almost exhausted her, so she couldn't manage to transfer any more witches' magic powers to Mystery Moon. Hopefully, Spear could get used to it gradually—after all, she might not have the time to study how to improve her abilities while she was a lord.

Second, substituting other witches for Anna. Compared with Anna, Soraya, and Agatha (who were usually busy with work), most of the other witches didn't have to exhaust their magic powers during the day. So if the rest of their magic powers could be used to produce variable magnetic core columns, it seemed plausible.

As long as the total volume of the magic powers didn't exceed that of Anna's, Spear would be able to handle it. She had once said that the passage for magic powers could be connected with more than two people at a time.

Thinking of this, Roland wrote it down. Questions like who had more magic powers or how much of the magic powers should be used per day were left for the Witch Union to calculate.

Undoubtedly, Wendy would be a perfect candidate since everybody trusted her.

After finding solutions for this problem, the next question was how to make use of this whole new energy.

Different from the steam engines, of which four to five pieces could be produced per month and would operate as long as boiling water was supplied, the number of terminal conversion machines was dependent on the number of Dawn Is. Considering the magic powers that could be used, he estimated that only three to four terminal conversion machines could be sustained in the little town. Whether to use them as source power, for boiling water, or supplying energy for light bulbs, the correct choice was imperative if the system was to operate steadily.

Roland thought for a long time and finally drew a circle on the light bulbs.

As for source power, electric motors exceeded steam engines in such aspects as stable rotating rates, easy maneuverability, and automatization. But the power supplied by steam engines was enough for the time being. He had also visualized some high-end electric equipment, such as electric cars that commuted between Longsong Stronghold and the little town, or electric airships that were accessible to ordinary people. But such equipment wasn't so cost effective—to make it work, Anna or other witches had to stop their work for a day.

The same was true with boiling water, which could simply be solved by a boiler and firewood could. Even though several workers needed to be hired to attend to and maintain the steam engines, it was still more economical than using magic powers. After all, the magic powers weren't that abundant.

Furthermore, lighting is more significant—a stable and clean

source of light could greatly increase the residents' happiness and render them better study conditions at night. After all, not everybody wants to read a book under the dim candle light after a day's stressful work.

Besides, doing something like seizing the legendary thunder power and using it for daily life would help eliminate suspicion and enhance scientific spirit. This was probably the civilians' most intuitive understanding of electricity's applications. As astonishing as airships and electric cars may sound, they were too far away from people's daily life.

More importantly, the weak candle light simply couldn't meet the needs for night production. With light bulbs, the factories would be able to sustain production even at night, and the workers could even work on three shifts if necessary, which meant the work efficiency in the little town would be further improved.

After setting the direction of development, there were still a series of problems to be solved to achieve his goals, such as light bulb manufacturing, line construction, power supply schemes, and the promotion of electricity utilization, etc.

But these problems could be considered later.

With this thought, Roland called Wendy.

"Do you intend to calculate the daily consumption and the surplus of my sisters' magic powers, and transfer them to Mystery Moon according to the plan?" Wendy asked, after hearing Roland's

statement.

"Yes. Those combat witches who have fixed missions can be excluded from your calculation though." The prince nodded.
"What do you think?"

Essentially, they were to gather the magic powers left after the witches' ability practice, mission consumption, and emergency preparation, and use them to produce the Dawn I. Such an arrangement could not only put the magic powers of witches into full play, but could also enhance the effects of their practice, which was helpful to the promotion of their magic powers on the annual Days of Awakening.

"I think Hummingbird and Echo would be happy," Wendy said with a smile, "because they can then be as useful as Anna. But how will the magic power surplus be measured?"

"By using the Stone of Measurement, which was a universal method used by the Union."

"Yes, Your Highness." She bowed slightly. "Right, today is the Day of Adulthood for Lucia. Should we gather all the members of the union to accompany her?"

Roland was shocked a bit. "Oh... I've almost forgotten it."

"There are so many things for you to remember," Wendy said softly. "I've written down every sister's growth history on this

notebook so that nothing will be missed."

After Anna's Day of Awakening, Lightning, Nana, and Echo had also passed their "second birthday" in succession. But the Day of Adulthood was actually more meaningful and it could be taken as a special Day of Awakening. Although they happened on the same day, the bite of magic power that one suffered on the Day of Adulthood was several times stronger than usual. Unless the witches could master how to eliminate the pain caused by biting, the Day of Adulthood could be a matter of life and death.

After adulthood, the witches' abilities would be stabilized while getting considerable improvements at the same time, and some witches could even develop derivative skills, which was as significant as evolution.

"OK. I'll prepare a rich dinner tonight." Roland said softly, "Besides the Witch Union, I'll be there to accompany her as well."

Chapter 426: The Shining Starlight

After dinner, the witches gathered in Lucia White's room.

Touched by their encouragement and comfort, she could feel her tear-filled eyes. She inhaled deeply with her eyes shut, willing herself not to cry.

"No crying. It's embarrassing enough to cry out loud in front of Nightingale, not to mention in front of my little sister. I must set a good example for her," Lucia chided herself.

She had only heard about a witch organization situated here before she boarded the boat towards the town. She was not hoping to live a good life here but simply to find a cure for her sister's demonic plague and a shelter.

What they found was not only a comfortable life, but a group of people with so much in common that they soon became like family. She felt at home again for the first time since her parents' death in the pirate attack.

"Is my sister really in danger?" Bell asked while resting in Lucia's arms, "How painful is a magic power bite?"

"Unbearable pain, it feels just like thousands of knives stabbing you from the inside of your body." Nightingale grinned. "Only a few witches can survive this. There are probably only one or two out of ten witches who can survive their Day of Adulthood."

The little girl shivered.

"You don't scare her." Wendy stared at Nightingale. "That was all the way back to the time of Witch Cooperation Association."

"All you need to do now is to keep on practicing every day and release all your magic power before the Day of Awakening, then you'll be fine," Scroll said, smiling. "I heard that even Anna was asleep when she was growing into her adulthood."

"And her first High Awakening appeared at the same time," Agatha yawned. "It'd definitely cause a stir if it happened 400 years ago back in Taquila, as there's never any witch who could come to enlightenment in their sleep."

"Are you alright?" His Highness looked at her and asked, "Even though work's important, you should not push yourself too hard."

"The Battle of Divine Will is approaching. If I'm not busy with it now..." Agatha said with her hands covering her mouth, "it would not be an issue to sleep forever if we fail this time."

"We won't fail for sure this time." Prince Roland assured.

"I decided to do a little bit more as I was feeling optimistic about your invention." Ice Witch rolled her eyes at him, "Otherwise, do you really think that I like to stay in the lab every day?" With these words, she turned around and muttered to herself softly, "I

wouldn't be able to do anything to you even if you don't fulfill your promise..."

"Well, you shouldn't discuss such a heavy story at this time." Wendy interrupted and said, "Oh yeah, didn't Miss Agatha mention before that each of the witches shall be granted a wish on the Day of Awakening? It's Lucia's turn this time; what would you like to wish for?"

"Uh... me?" Lucia was shocked to find that she was the center of attention in the knot of witches.

"Get the ice cream bread in exchange, sister!" Bell said with her eyes sparkling, "10 of them will do, and we'll have a half each!"

"This one... all you can think of is food," she thought and gave her sister a good knock on her forehead. Then she looked towards Roland. "May I keep this wish for now?"

"If you wish." He could not help but smile and say, "However it would not increase even if you keep it."

"Only one will do," Lucia answered with gratitude. She had nothing more to ask for herself as long as she could live in this town. All she could hope for was for Bell to live a happy life. Her younger sister was not a witch, so she would have to leave her and build her own family with someone someday. This wish might be able to help her if there were any changes by then.

It was then that Lucia felt her empty body tremble suddenly and the magic power was regenerated as if it was appearing in the void and pouring into her body continuously.

"It's started." Nightingale reminded.

Even though the sisters told her not to worry, she grasped the blanket tightly, as a chill washed over her palms and the soles of her feet. This she ascribed to an overwhelming sensation of tension.

"Relax," Wendy said, reaching for her hands. "The magic power is part of our body."

"Should we talk about something else to distract her?" Lucia heard someone, perhaps Lily, ask.

"What should we talk about?" Mystery Moon asked.

"What about the result of the second test?" Lily's voice seemed to come from far away. "Normally once the topic's brought up, she immediately changes the subject and diverts attention, like what about Mystery Moon's results..."

"Don't say!"

"Look, it works."

Lucia wanted to laugh but she realized that the expression on her face was very stiff and it was scorching hot inside her body. At the same time, there was an undefinable sense of contraction and increasingly more magic power as if she was sucking everything around her into her body.

Will every witch experience this feeling in her Day of Adulthood?

"What was Lucia's result?" She could only hear Mystery Moon intermittently.

"Her average was 86," Prince Roland replied.

"Wh... what?"

"That's very high!"

"You see, she didn't even try to stop us."

"You've failed, so it's time for punishment!"

"Go away!"

"Hold on... Stop fighting, Lucia doesn't seem to look right."

She could hear the conversation between Mystery Moon, Lily and finally Nightingale's voice, but she realized the voices of the

witches had become distant to her. Lucia was clenching her teeth and she held her head up to look at the sisters around her. She was shocked to see the completely changed scene. Everyone's appearance became hazy and pixelated like a composition of innumerable squares—some big, some small and each of them had a different color.

She wanted to scream in terror but all she could hear was the hissing sound in her breath.

The contraction in her body was getting stronger and it started to cause a vague but growing sense of pain. Lucia could only hold her breath and see people around her starting to get busy.

It was exactly like Nightingale said, the pain in the Day of Adulthood was far beyond the pain of the awakening. The more persistent she was, the stronger the pain became; it felt as if she was being cut into pieces.

Suddenly, a strange magic power probed her body. Lucia could clearly feel the magic power did not belong to herself. It was just like a tube ridden in the magic whirlpool.

She could not bear it any longer, subconsciously yielding to the overwhelming power and allowing the current to carry her. As if she had finally found her savior, Lucia kept injecting the magic power into it to suppress the pain in her body.

The strange contraction eased after a period of time. The magic power no longer twirled around but it felt substantial and solid; it

was a completely different experience.

She blinked and was relieved to find that her vision had fully returned.

Looking at a fearful Bell, Lucia patted her head and reassured her in a hoarse voice, "It's alright now."

This was when she realized that she was soaked in sweat. She could feel the chill on her back when the cold wind blew.

"Wait, how could there be any wind in a room with the heater on?"

When she turned her head, she was shocked to see the huge gaps in the wall facing the garden and the two missing windows that allowed the cold air to swarm in. She could see the dark night and the tiny little lights of the small town through the gap. Standing in front of the wall was Anna, looking at her with concern. The Sigil of God's Will in her hand glimmered.

"Her ability has crystallized," Nightingale said.

Chapter 427: The Aftermath

Roland walked into the office yawning as the sky turned bright.

He had not expected so many accidents on the Day of Adulthood. It was supposed to be an easy day.

The magic in Lucia's body became extremely turbulent. Nightingale realized something was wrong with her expression. It was exactly the sign of the magic power bite. It was incredible that this was happening to a witch who practiced frequently, especially since she had released all her magic power prior to her Day of Adulthood.

Agatha came out with a solution.

As an ex-member of the Union she had witnessed countless witches awaken. She quickly thought of a remedy.

Ice Witch made Spear Passi summon the magic power channel and release the bite from Lucia's body. Then it was transferred to Anna who had the greatest capacity. Finally, the restless magic power was absorbed by the Sigil of God's Will.

Surprisingly, the released magic power had lit up four God's Stones and activated the Sigil of God's Will. Anna released it into the open space without further hesitation.

Suddenly, the town was brightened by the golden sun. The

dazzling light shone through the castle wall and pierced through the dark, starless sky. The thick clouds could be seen in the dark sky and there were thousands of tassels flowing in the sky. It was incredibly beautiful. Although it only lasted for a few moments, the scene was undoubtedly miraculous.

Lucia was finally safe and she had developed a new ability during this adulthood transformation, just like Anna had a year ago.

However, it was not without trouble. The accident had happened around eight o'clock at night, when most people were still awake. Quite a number of people must have witnessed this spectacular event. Roland would have to come up with an explanation to the public when he returned to his room.

"Your Highness, Director Barov asked to see you," the door guard informed after knocking on the door.

"Let him in."

Barov with a head full of white hair walked into the office. Before he paying his respect, he blatantly asked, "Your Highness, what happened last night? How come there was daylight appearing in the night?"

He was indeed here about the light. Roland took a glance at his face and saw dark circles. He probably had not slept either. If outsiders were not strictly prohibited from entering the castle at night, he would have come to the door last night.

"No hurry. Have a seat." Roland pointed at the chair in front of the table and said, "Have a cup of black tea first."

Roland mentioned the incident of Lucia's adulthood after pouring a glass of hot tea. "It was just an accident, don't worry too much."

"So... this was caused by a witch?" The City Hall Director frowned.

"Don't be silly. It was not the demonic side." Roland quickly guessed the other party's thought. "No one was hurt aside from the missing wall of this old, broken castle."

"But the villagers will think this," Barov shook his head. "Most of them accepted the harmless healing power of Miss Nana but not the ability to destroy the castle like this, causing astonishing changes in the sky."

"That's why I came up with a solution," said Roland while sipping his tea. "You'll arrange for your men to spread this news: the golden light that appeared last night was from when His Highness captured lightning, in order to bring light to his people."

"What?" Barov was stunned.

"I'll soon be building the power supply equipment in Border Town. It has a similar essence to the lightning in the sky." Prince Roland explained briefly. He knew he was speaking technically and

the other party could hardly understand. "This equipment can light up the town brightly even during the night. It coincides with the news."

"Is that... Is that true?" The director asked in surprise, "Can you really make lightning?"

"It's everywhere by itself," Roland shrugged and said, "however, please remember that it's just hearsay, so it shall be spread according to 'the Art of Rumor'. Do you understand?"

In order to prevent any impact on the universal education in the future, these statements should not be too democratic. It would be fine as long as an ambiguous explanation could temporarily be given to the public to redirect the discussion towards himself.

Not too long after Barov left, Karl Van Bate, the Minister of Construction came to the castle.

"Your Highness, regarding last night..."

"I know what you want to ask," Roland put his hand on his forehead. "Sit down first and we'll talk."

He sighed silently to himself. Perhaps he would have to explain this incident for the entire day.

Fortunately, Karl was not a deep thinker like Barov, and he simply sighed after listening and said, "It turns out Anna has

already become so strong."

"It was indeed a decisive disposition at the time." Roland agreed.
"If there was any further delay, I'm afraid it would have been not only the wall that disappeared but the whole bedroom instead."

"The gap in the wall..."

"Just fill it in with bricks. You can go ahead to arrange an exact plan as long as it's done before the nightfall. I'll get Lightning and Hummingbird to help you with this." Prince Roland said. The appearance of the castle would need to be restored after mending the wall. He would get Soraya to paint a simulation coating on it.

"Yes, Your Highness."

As expected, Carter Lannis, the Chief Knight; Iron Axe, the instructor of the First Army and Kyle Sichi, the alchemist, were taking turns to ask about yesterday's incident and each of them had a different concern.

Carter was concerned about whether she was hurt.

Iron Axe was concerned that the light had been caused by the demons' attack.

However, what concerned Kyle was... which was more powerful, the Sigil of God's Will or the nitric acid glycerine?

The men were finally dismissed after a series of non-stop talking and explanations by Roland. He leaned back in his chair, getting ready to take a nap but someone was knocking on the door again.

The last to enter was Tilly Wimbledon.

"No worries. Yesterday was..."

"I already know about it." Lady Tilly interrupted. "I asked Miss Anna before I came here and she told me what happened."

"Oh, I see." Roland cleared his throat and sat up straight.
"Anything else?"

"I'm just a little concerned with the cause." Tilly said slowly, "According to Miss Agatha, be it awakening or adulthood, as long as a certain amount of practice is carried out normally, it shouldn't cause any sign of magic power bite. It's basically in line with what we've learned from past experience. It's never happened to any of the witches on the Sleeping Island, so how could Lucia be the one who fell into the bite of the magic power?" She paused here for a little, shook her head and said with a smile, "As for the High Awakening, I'm not surprised... I've seen a few of them each day since I arrived in Border Town."

A few of them each day, that's an extreme exaggeration... Roland thought, he poured her a cup of tea. Contemplating for a moment, he said, "I do have a preliminary guess regarding Lucia's misfortune." He pulled out a transcript from the drawer and

handed it to Tilly. "This's probably the reason."

Chapter 428: An Exploration Of Magic Power

"... Grades?" Tilly took the transcript, glanced at it doubtfully, and said, "She did improve a lot."

"Yes," Roland nodded. "As a businessman's daughter in Valencia, Lucia White already had basic writing and arithmetic skills, and she also performed well in the natural theory course. That's why her grades are so good."

"I'm not questioning your theory that 'a better understanding and cognition of the world can help develop abilities,' " replied Tilly, twitching her mouth, "but what does it have to do with the bite of magic power?"

"Judging from the evolution of Lily, Leaf, and Mystery Moon, as well as other witches, we can tell that evolution also increases witches' magic power limits. I think such limits have a lot to do with how well witches perceive the world." Combining what Agatha referred to as "ancient High Awakening" and the evolution of the town witches' abilities, Roland explained his theory in details. "They're essentially the same thing. However, witches who evolved by partial or random enlightenment are far less powerful than those who evolved by a full, comprehensive understanding of the world—Mystery Moon is a typical example. Although she's a member of the Witch Union, her evolution was achieved through enlightenment, so her magic power isn't in the same league as Anna's and Soraya's."

Tilly soon learned what Roland meant after a moment of

reflection, "You mean the reason Miss Lucia's magic power was low both on normal days and her Day of Awakening is that her body has adjusted to a certain level of magic power? Yet her ability evolved when she entered adulthood, which resulted in an instant surge in her magic power, and so much power was far more than she could take, right?"

"Pretty much like that, but I prefer to think there are two different types of power increases." Roland continued, counting on his fingers, "Magic power increases on the Day of Awakening, on the Day of Adulthood, and during evolution. The effects seem the same, but I believe the first two are passive, while the last is voluntary."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because evolution won't cause magic power bites," the prince replied slowly. "If this wasn't the case, Anna would have been killed by the surge of magic power during her evolution. I assume there's a magic power redline for witches. Once they go beyond it, they'll suffer from bites. Daily practice can gradually increase their limits, and that's also why witches need to empty all their magic power before awakening."

"Redline? It sounds interesting..." Tilly murmured, sinking into her thoughts. "Do you think the outpouring of magic power that was generated by Miss Lucia's evolution resulted in insufficient space for magic power on the Day of Awakening, which led her to exceed the power limit and thus caused the accident?"

"Correct. Like Lucia, Anna experienced her first evolution when

she reached adulthood, but her magic power capacity was incredible, so she had a much higher limit for bites than ordinary witches." Roland paused for a moment. "This also explains why Lucia went back to normal after Spear extracted the agitated magic power—that power didn't belong to her anyway."

"Your theory... does clarify a lot of problems." Tilly pushed her hair behind her ear and propped up her chin on her hand, apparently absorbed in thoughts. "Why witches present different forms of magic power despite their power sharing the same origin? Why free magic power can only be seen upon witches' awakenings? Because witches can't integrate it unless they accept it."

Roland said with a smile, "We can view awakening as drawing magic power in, but only a small part of it can be retained. Evolution expands and develops this small part, and the greater cognitive breadth a witch possesses, the better strengthening effects she'll obtain. It's also reasonable to assume that there's no limit on the number of times a witch can evolve, since the exploration of the world is endless."

"I'm suddenly curious."

"What?"

"If you were a witch, how extensive would your power be after evolution?" asked Tilly, covering her smile.

Roland nearly choked himself. Although he really wanted to personally experience these extraordinary powers, he would rather

turn them down knowing the sacrifices he had to make.

"Can I bring a copy of the textbooks you wrote back to Sleeping Island?" Tilly asked, while raising her eyebrow.

She sounded pretty casual, but Roland noticed her right hand gently grasping her skirt's hemline.

"Absolutely." He would not miss a single chance to leave his sister a good impression, and generally speaking, it was better to respond as quickly as possible. "It'll also be helpful to Border Town if the witches on Sleeping Island evolve. Besides, you're my sister."

Nightingale immediately pinched his left shoulder with immense strength.

"..." Tilly did not respond back, but simply showed her gratitude with a slight nod. "Thank you, I'll be excused then."

"Sure."

It looks like my performance was overdone. She probably won't be interested in this kind of approach before hearing a convincing explanation.

Yet to Roland's surprise, Tilly stopped at the door, turned her head and answered quietly, "Sometimes, I'd rather hope that you aren't my brother."

...

After Tilly's departure, Roland sat at his desk in a daze, with her last sentence reverberating all around his head.

Would rather hope I'm not her brother. What does that mean?

"Hey, are you OK?" Nightingale revealed herself, waving her finger in front of the prince.

"What do you think her last sentence meant?"

"How do I know?" Nightingale commented with a shrug.
"Perhaps she thinks you're better as an ally than a sibling."

Roland would certainly not assume anything inappropriate, since he had already known this royal princess pretty well after cooperating with her for half a winter.

Could she mean that she doesn't want Prince Roland to come back? Or was it just the backlash of his lame approach?

"You aren't her brother anyway. Why do you even care?" Nightingale turned over to sit on the desk, crossing her slender legs. She thrust a piece of dried fish into her mouth and added, "Plus, I could tell you were lying without even using my ability when you said 'you're my sister'."

"Um, is that so..." Roland stroked his nose. "So the answer is the latter then?"

"Also, since Tilly isn't your real sister, is it alright to give her that Natural 'Something' Theory?"

"That's Natural Science Theoretical Foundation," the prince corrected her with a sigh. "There are several months of winter. Don't you think she can produce a copy? I bet she already knows everything by heart, but she still requested my formal permission. This definitely says something about her attitude."

At least from the standpoint of political alliance, there's no question in Tilly's sincerity.

He waited for a moment before continuing, "The residents on Sleeping Island are primarily witches. Even if all of them have evolved, they still rely on witches' power. However, I'm different. The knowledge not only enables witches to progress, but ordinary people as well... It's the power of all the people that I'm relying on."

Chapter 429: Element Separation

Accompanied by howling wind and raging snow, Lucia entered the backyard of North Slope Mountain and closed the door, shutting the chill out of the room.

A circle of wooden sheds was pitched in the yard after winter kicked in. Although the lighting was somewhat affected, the houses here would at least not be buried in piles of snow.

There was a bonfire in the yard, and Lucia could even feel the heat of its flickering flames by the door. She took off her gloves and put her freezing hands above the blazes to warm herself up.

"Are you cold?" Anna, who stood at the workstation, turned her head and beckoned. "Come here, I'll warm you up."

"Ah... thank you." Lucia trotted to her. Soon bathed in warm green flames that gave her a languid and relaxing sensation from head to toe, she felt like she was soaking in the bathtub of the castle.

"Such a convenient ability..." Lucia thought enviously. "She's never afraid of the bitter cold."

"Are you warm now?"

"Yes!" she affirmed, nodding vigorously. "What are you making?"

"Some parts for new guns." Anna grabbed a long slim steel tube with a piston in the middle and pulled it back and forth. "His Highness says he's not sure if it'll work with the first shot, so it needs to be tested repeatedly."

These parts, bright and shiny from the outside, were apparently made from the best rolled steel and were carefully carved by the Blackfire. Before coming to the town, Lucia would have never thought that the surface of iron objects could be as smooth as glass, like artwork.

She had also made a contribution to their creation. Lucia could not suppress a smile at this thought. Both Roland and Anna had said that without high-quality materials, the finished products would still be damaged goods, even with precise and refined processing methods.

"His Highness didn't come with you?" asked Anna, who withdrew her green fire.

"He said that he still needed to take care of something and would come a little later. He asked me to first get familiar with my new ability," Lucia answered, twitching her mouth.

"What does your ability look like after the evolution?" Anna inquired with great interest. "There's probably no one in the Witch Union who created a bigger stir than you did upon entering adulthood."

Lucia scratched her head, looking a bit embarrassed. "I probably

couldn't have made it without you and milord Spear."

"You already thanked me, no need to worry about it." Anna dismissed it with a wave. "Let's see your new ability."

Lucia agreed. She summoned the magic power in her body and again sensed the same odd feeling enveloping her heart— everything became strange and obscure, dividing into numerous tiny squares that grouped together by color, forming different color speckles. However, this time she did not suffer any pain from magic power bites, so she could calm herself down and carefully observe each single square.

She took one of the parts processed by Anna. There were lumps and bumps on its surface, which had been smooth and shiny earlier. With the help of the magic power, she could clearly see the color speckles on it—there were around seven or eight color blocks, the largest of which was cyan. As if an artist carelessly spilled various pigments on the floor, there were no patterns whatsoever in their arrangement. The only difference, however, was that each color speckle had visible boundaries that prevented them from mixing with each other.

It occurred to Lucia that these were not the tiny particles His Highness had referred to. These "squares" and "color speckles" were just too big to be considered as the fundamental elements of everything.

There's a larger classification than the particle, which is the element.

Small particles form larger ones in accordance with different patterns and rules, and these larger particles will exhibit entirely different properties due to their various structures.

Lucia used to have no idea about her own ability or its specific functions back in Valencia, but now she thoroughly understood the concept of elements. According to His Highness' description and classification, she believed it was elements that she had just observed.

After hearing what Lucia saw and thought, Anna pondered for a while and said, "It may be a type of derivative skill."

"Derivative... skill?"

"That's a rare talent," Anna explained, smiling. "There are only a few adult witches in the Witch Union who possess such a talent—according to Agatha, it only occurs on the Day of Adulthood. Once you miss it, you miss it forever. I believe it has a lot to do with the witch's primary ability, or we can say, it supplements and strengthens the primary power. For example, Soraya needs to first mix pigments into paint if she doesn't have the magic brush. The same applies to Miss Scroll's Book of Magic. She once told me that although she could quickly memorize most of the books prior to adulthood, she couldn't share the contents with others because she didn't have any money to purchase pens and paper."

Anna paused for a moment before continuing. "Your main ability is separation and restoration, so I reckon these color speckles may

be assisting you in accurately separating a specific type of element—you can give it a shot to see whether you can separate a particular color block or not."

Lucia nodded. She started to once again apply her power to the pig iron ingot by the workstation. Unlike the separation earlier, this time she cautiously transformed her magic power into a filament to pull the cyan squares.

The whole process was much harder than she expected. Lucia had never manipulated her magic power in such a laborious manner, but she was delighted to see her progress. Compared with her confusion prior to adulthood, she was now able to truly feel the magic power, as if it had become her own fingers—even an extension of her consciousness.

As more filaments clung to the color speckle, the squares finally started to loosen up and wriggle out of the iron ingot. Meanwhile, the rest of the color speckles also changed—their distinct boundaries began to wobble, and the whole iron ingot collapsed and crumbled into a yellow green crystal as small as half of a nail, next to which appeared a box-like iron block.

Lucia withdrew her power and wiped the perspiration from her forehead. She noticed the crystal and the block displayed different colors under the magic power than with normal vision—the previous cyan speckle had turned silver white, which was a color usually seen among pure iron. Nevertheless, the crystal still remained colorful, but if she did not look at it using her magic power, it just looked like a polished gemstone.

"What's this?" Lucia gently took the tiny crystal. Its size was not even close to that of the iron ingot, but it looked much more beautiful.

"It's probably a compound formed by the other elements in the pig iron," Anna suggested, her eyes glistening. "I'm not sure, but I can do a small experiment to verify it. If I've guessed right, do you know what that means? It means that you can separate some elements from an object and reorganize the rest of the elements, instead of breaking them up... Any useless, poor-quality materials can be reborn with the help of your power."

Chapter 430: "The Star Of Steel"

It was the last month of winter in Border Town after Lucia's day of adulthood.

As for the Months of Demons, the end of winter did not mean the end of the snow. The snow would often continue to fall until the spring of the second year, and it was totally in God's hands as to when it would cease.

Based on past experiences, the Months of Demons would end within the first half of the first month of spring, and it would be a very difficult period. It would be an extremely tough time if it ended within the second half of the first month. The days could become hard to survive if it delayed until the second month.

However, it was a situation that only the local people ever encountered.

The situation this year had been greatly improved. The wheat being stored in the granary would be enough to make sure everyone was adequately fed, even if the Months of Demons continued to the end of the second month of spring.

Roland naturally would not be satisfied merely by no one being starved or frozen to death. Over the last few days, he had been sprawling across his desk, excitedly working on many drawings and the ideas for the next stage of his big plan. The entire plan was divided into both military and civilian aspects. The former included the construction of the weapon factory, the bicycle plant,

and the dock as well as the shallow water gunboats and other locations. The latter mainly involved the connections for the water, heat, and electricity of the residential area in addition to the promotion of the universal use of the iron farming tools.

It was Lucia White who motivated him. After he realized what her ability was, Roland clearly recognized that the final limitation of the mass production was resolved, and the productivity of the town could usher into a new peak of the growth in the population.

The limitation was the supply of materials.

The modern way of smelting was very complicated, and the output of steel iron was one of the most important parameters to measure an industrial country. However, Roland did not know much about it, and this was the main reason that the iron making capacity of the town was still outdated. Not only were the techniques not as advanced, the scale was not nearly comparable with the private smeltery owned by some mining businessmen. When the iron ore in the brick blast furnace was smelt into pig iron, quality pieces would be sent away to become parts of steam engines, while the poorer quality ones would be passed to Anna for further processing into steel. However, this process was totally out of control, and the carbon content was not stable. Sometimes, the useful materials could only fill up one to two carriages after an entire workday, which greatly limited the production of the steam engine manufacturing plant.

Although the low-quality pig iron could be processed into the quality-controlled rolled steel with Anna's special smelter, the production quantity was only enough for military plant use. It

would basically meet the need of the small town in the fall, but with the two expansions of the army and the development of new firearms and cannons, the limited quantity of rolled steel could potentially be overstretched come winter.

Lucia's evolution could be described as a cardiac stimulant; her targeted separation ability would allow easy removal of undesirable components in the material and regulate the elements proportions in the smelting phase, allowing each furnace of molten steel to be maintained at the same performance.

The smelting standard of Border Town would instantly increase exponentially with the help of both Anna and Lucia.

Roland had already got Anna to put down all the other projects on hand in order to concentrate on the creation of the enormous, latest generation smelter for this reason.

The new smelter was 10 times bigger in size compared with the old special smelter designed by her previously, extending to 50 meters in length, 10 meters in width and four meters in height. It looked like a slender swimming pool at the first glance. It was essentially similar to the last generation special furnace; it was still a metal box without any heating equipment and fully independent on Anna's Blackfire. However, it was buried in the ground, relying on the soil to support the pressure of the molten iron on the walls. There was also an aisle built in the center for Anna to heat up the iron ingots on both sides at the same time.

The huge volume was its only advantage. Based on the previous smelting method, it would contain too much of product for only

the limestones used for removal purposes; it also required a lot of effort to clean the impurities generated and would be very painstaking to reinforce and stir them. Thus, it should not be mass produced or used with the old method. However, there was no such concern now. As long as the pig iron was melted, Lucia could eliminate the harmful components, such as phosphorus and sulfur.

Roland intended to build a batch of kilns along with the old blast and shaft furnaces. He was only responsible for the initial smelting, and he did not care about the quality of the finished product as long as the ore could be melted into the rectangular iron ingots, all of which were then put into the new smelter for secondary refining. The molten steel formed would flow through the strobe into the mold at the lower terrain and directly form the materials to be processed. After that, the steam engine plant would be converted into rolled steel production, and it would bring a powerful new source of motivation to the town.

Roland was going to name the latest smelter "Star of Steel".

As soon as Anna completed the manufacturing, the steel production of the town would be more than 10 times higher with the Star of Steel officially in use.

It could be said that the latest large-scale production plan was built on this basis.

Furthermore, the development of the state-of-the-art light-weight weapon had come to a conclusion.

Roland discovered that his initial idea was not appropriate. He had designed a few prototype weapons himself based on the principle of the latest pneumatic automatic rifle, which simply used some of the high pressure gas generated while the bullet was fired to finish the process of ejecting, chambering and re-filling.

This project took about half a month. It was not difficult but it needed to test each of the components repeatedly to make sure it operated normally. He did not bother to memorize the specific structure of the rifle. As long as he knew the operation of the weapon, he thought he would definitely be able to piece together a useful weapon after a few tries.

That was exactly where the problem lay.

The completed prototype machine was not only humongous, it also consisted of almost one hundred different components which were all custom-made by Anna. These included small little gadgets like springs, the firing pins, and the induction pistons. It was really hard to mass produce such a weapon with the current machine tool. If all the revolving rifles in the soldiers' hands were to be replaced by automatic weapons, it would not only increase Anna's burden, but the current firearms processing equipment units that had been put into production would be wasted as well.

Additionally, the ammunition consumption was undoubtedly going to increase significantly if all the soldiers were equipped with the automatic weapons. Roland did not care too much about this in the beginning as he felt that it could be resolved by increasing manpower. However, he soon discovered that as soon as the new weapon was put into production, it could easily overtake

the entire production of the acid plant.

The frequent cartridge jamming during the shooting test, failure to fire, and the other small issues had become less important as he realized that the weapon production was not feasible.

He finally dispelled the idea of mass replacement of the automatic weapons after repeated contemplation. However, increasing the firepower of the military had become an urgent need. He began to shift his focus on continuous firing weapons.

He was considering the heavy machine gun.

A heavy machine gun could be assigned to 20 to 50 people in order to significantly reduce the number of weapons. In this case, both of the most critical problems would be solved easily. It could also be self-loaded with the use of a ventilation method; the structure was similar to the trial manufacture of the prototype weapons. It could be put into the principal test after a few alterations, and it could be built in a bigger size with bigger components. The difficulty to himself, Anna, and Lucia would be greatly reduced.

Chapter 431: From The Kingdom Of Dawn

Apart from the upgraded heavy machine gun, Roland also planned to develop a bolt rifle which would have a mid to long shooting range. He did not need many, a mere hundred or so would suffice. The rifle would have the same caliber as the heavy machine gun, and could be easily transformed into a sniper rifle by simply installing a gun sight.

In this way, he could continue to manufacture revolving firearms and black powder bullets without a huge waste of the products.

During a battle, soldiers could use field artilleries to suppress enemy forces within 800 to 1,000 meters and heavy machines guns 500 to 800 meters. Snipers could take care of enemies in less than 500 meters, and revolving rifles could be used to clear out enemies within the last 200 meters. Therefore he could, in theory, make sure every inch of the battle field was covered.

Of course, it would probably take three or four months to fully equip his army with the whole set of weapons he planned to make. He might not be able to complete it before the spring attack. Therefore, he needed another weapon, an inland river gunboat equipped with a culverin with a 152mm caliber. One would be enough to pressure on enemies when he launched the attack.

Roland felt he held more responsibilities upon his shoulders than before. He thought of the founding ceremony subsequent to the Months of Demons, the unification of the entire Western Region and the new population that would swarm in after he kicked Timothy off the throne. He even wished time could have slowed

down its pace, and that the Months of Demons hadn't ended so soon.

Upon entering the Western Region, the landscape started to change.

Otto Luoxi lifted up the blinds and peeped through the window. Heaven and earth were washed out altogether. The sky was covered with dense snowflakes which swirled in the harsh wind, drifted down to the ground and blended into the vast canvas of whiteness.

It seemed that the heavy snow would never cease. He could see nothing other than piles of snow cloaking the soil, rocks and woods in the past two days. If the boat was not wobbly, he would even think it remained on the river.

"Shut the blinds." The captain grunted. "Go out on the deck if you really want to see it. Nobody will care."

He did not take the captain's words personally, but shut the blinds and asked, "Does it always look like this here?"

"Of course, do you think I was bluffing?" The captain sipped wine from his decanter and said, "Every year when the Months of the Demons arrives, the Western Region is cut off because of the snow. There's no way to get here except through the Redwater River. I

can use my fingers to count how many people in the entire King's City are willing to ferry you over here in this bloody weather. Well, they also gotta have a boat." He grumbled, letting out a burp. "So five gold royals is an awfully good deal. You got it?"

"It's a bit expensive, but I didn't bargain with you when I paid," said Otto, smiling.

"That sounds better." The Captain tossed the decanter to him and said, "It's warm. Drink some. It'll warm you up." He wiped his mouth and continued, "There was once this tradesman who wanted to purchase goods from the Western Region faster than anyone else, but he didn't want to pay a little more for the fare, so he asked the rats on the black street to ferry him. You know what? That fellow was killed halfway. Those few mercenaries he brought with him were craps. They all ended up feeding the fishes."

"That was... really unfortunate." Otto took the decanter, but did not pull out the cork to drink the wine. Instead, he took off his gloves and held the decanter in his hands. He really did not feel comfortable sharing drinks with others.

"You get what you pay for. It's a universal rule. There're always people who think they can get away with it. Did it never occur to him that if rats agree to provide him with the service at such a low price, how are we going to run our business?" The captain added, twitching his mouth, "By the way, what's your trade in the Western Region? Don't you blame me for not reminding you. There used to be jewelry and furs in this damn place, but you can't get anything from here now."

"Really?" Otto marveled, pretending to be interested. "As far as I know, don't they make a living on these trades? Have people in the Western Region all become bandits now?"

"They're stale news now." The captain lit his pipe with the charcoal fire and inhaled deeply. "Ever since Prince Roland ruled Border Town, the Western Region has become weird. You know the town is well known for its furs and jewelry, but nobody knows what the hell the prince is messing around with in his territory. Now there're only imports but no exports. Some jewelry still gets sold in the Longsong Stronghold, but the noble has their specific ways to get a hold of it. You can't butt in."

"Only imports but no exports?" He echoed, stunned.

"Yes. Although you can't purchase local products, sales are pretty good. You can pretty much sell out everything from food and garments all the way to fabrics and general goods. No one knows where Prince Roland got so many gold royals from." The captain breathed out some smoke and concluded, "So you're very likely to return empty-handed this time."

Otto put on a worried look without giving any response. In fact, he did not really care whether this would be a fruitless journey, as his sole purpose was to meet the lord of Border Town. However, due to the hostile relationship between Roland and Timothy, he had to be disguised as a tradesman and come to the border in secret.

Before taking off, he had already conducted a thorough investigation of his destination.

As its name suggested, Border Town was insignificant to neighbors. It was initially built for the purpose of monitoring the intrusion of demonic beasts, and was later transformed into a town for permanent residence. From the prince's widespread notoriety and the wasteland he was entitled, it was widely believed that Prince Roland was the least favorite of the king, and had been abandoned to his fate on the border.

However, the truth was, not only did he settle down in the Western Region, but he had also become a big threat to the new king. This was what confused Otto the most. If Prince Roland was indeed a capable man, what was his infamy based on and how had he put himself in such a desperate position in the first place?

According to his information, the rise of Roland Wimbledon was just incredible.

As a matter of fact, it was more like the prince had been banished to Border Town a year ago, accompanied by no ministers or guards. Even the knights with him were dispatched by the king. It was almost impossible for him to force the local noble to submit to his rules with such inadequate resources, not to mention the implementation of his policies. Therefore, a lot of people treated his arrival as a joke.

Nevertheless, Prince Roland defeated Duke Ryan and conquered the Longsong Stronghold, becoming the true ruler of the Western Region in merely six months. There were various rumors about the battle among the mass. Some believed the duke was killed during an internal rebellion, while others thought he'd been thrown from

horseback, which was why the knightage failed to compete against a group of miners.

Roland thus secured his position as ruler of the Western Region. The wars induced by the Royal Decree on the Selection of Crown Prince had become increasingly intense. With Prince Gerald and Princess Garcia being killed in succession and Princess Tilly missing, cities in the Southern Territory and the Eastern Region were devastated by the constant chaos. Only the Western Region remained tranquil and peaceful.

This was certainly not due to the benevolence of the new king, but that the armies sent by Timothy had never come back. Otto was very curious about what on earth Roland had done to foster such fierce soldiers.

"Captain, Border Town is right at the front." The sailor pushed the cabin door open and reported, "We're almost there."

"Ah, finally!" The captain tapped the pipe and yelled, "Lower the sail, raise the flag and tell the dockmen that we're here! I'm going to a tavern to have a good sip." He looked at Otto and reminded him, "Hey, don't you forget your luggage. See you in a week. I'm not waiting for you if you run late."

Otto shrugged his shoulders, showing no objections.

Out of all the rumors about Prince Roland, the one he cared about most was that the prince had given himself up to demons and was hiring witches in secret. This was believed to be the real reason he

was able to quickly crush the duke and occupy the whole Western Region, the evidence of which was the burned church in the Stronghold, the murder of the Priest and the expulsion of believers.

He came here actually because of this rumor.

Otto did not care about whether the prince was trading with demons or hiring witches, as long as the prince was on the opposite side of the church.

In this regard, Roland was more beneficial to the Kingdom of Dawn than Timothy.

The cabin suddenly shook violently when the boat was ashore.

Chapter 432: An Encounter

Since his trip was kept confidential, obviously there would be nobody greeting him.

Therefore, Otto did not plan to go straight to the castle, but to first spend one or two days looking at the prince's territory before turning to local rats for information, as a picture was worth a thousand words.

He walked out of the cabin and onto the trestle, and was immediately astonished at what he saw.

This is... really a borderland wharf?

The dock areas were built with russet colored bricks within several hundred paces from the river bank. Trestles were built at certain intervals, with a sign where the trestle and the dock connected, on which there was a number. Otto counted them roughly. There were 26 in total, all of which were neatly displayed like tentacles extending from the bank. Some were covered with snow while others revealed the tawny planks beneath. This indicated the town's wharf was well taken care of even during the Months of the Demons.

In comparison, the trestles at the dock of King's City were less than half the ones here in terms of both length and number!

However, what stunned him more was the boats at the wharf.

A line of colossal gray boats he had never seen were at berth not far away. There were seven or eight in total, each of which had a shallow waterline with no sail or mast. Nonetheless, they were definitely too big to be operated by poles. One unique feature of these strange boats was the giant wooden tire on either side and the bulky iron pipe in the middle. They looked different from any inland river boats.

Otto stood there and watched them for quite a while. He was still trying to figure out how these weird "tire boats" were operated when it began to snow.

He brushed the snow off his head, put these thoughts behind him, and decided to follow the crew to the town.

Apparently, Otto was not the only passenger on the "Downwind" from King's City. He watched the crew unloading cargo and piling it up at the wharf. Several guards wearing black uniforms were jotting something down on the paper. They seemed to be examining the goods, as they picked out a couple of bags every now and then.

"Who are those people? The mercenaries hired by buyers?" Otto went to ask the captain.

"Huh? Mercenaries?" The captain beamed, "Those guys are patrollers in Border Town."

"Patrollers?" He was puzzled. Weren't they the same as bandits?

He remembered the first time he left King's City, the patrollers there blackmailed him for two silver royals, which he later learned was actually a common practice everywhere. These patrollers were sort of the rivals of underground rats, but they basically did the same thing. The difference was they charged more and often charged for nothing. However, to Otto's surprise, the captain seemed pretty relaxed, still smoking his pipe leisurely without any intention to stop them, nor did he thrust them silver royals or ask the patrollers to leave.

"I thought the same thing when I came here for the first time." The captain explained, seeming to have read his mind, "The patrollers here are different. As long as you follow their rules, you don't need to pay anything before entering the market."

"Patrollers' rules?" Otto doubted, frowning. "Even the bandits here talk about rules, and they also note things down. They probably write nothing but wriggly symbols, but this is already more than enough to blow my mind."

"What are they recording?" he questioned.

"The types and numbers of goods... especially wheat," the captain answered, throwing up his hands. "Goods will be checked after being delivered to the market. This is to prevent you from selling them to others halfway. The food here can only be sold by the lord. Of course, I don't have wheat in my cargo, so it's going to be fast."

All the bags were loaded to the carriages and everybody departed from the wharf, ready to set out for the market. Otto was suddenly dazzled by the scene.

Is this really the most deserted territory in the Kingdom of Graycastle?

Looking at the smooth, hard-surfaced road, the handsome houses along the street and people going to and fro, Otto felt the town was as thriving as City of Glow, the capital of the Kingdom of Dawn.

As a noble, he had seen many magnificent buildings. Compared with the Spire of Dawn and the Great Hall of Sun, these two or three-story buildings were definitely not in the same league.

Yet there was only one Spire of Dawn, which was surrounded by tumble-down houses, swampy paths, and muddy water.

However, he could not find a single house here that looked even slightly worn, as if all the residences had come about at the same time.

"You look quite surprised," the captain said, laughing. "Nothing to be embarrassed about. Everybody was as stunned as you when they first came here. I ought to say Border Town is an amazing place. See the three-story building over there? It wasn't there when I was here last time."

"I heard... that it used to be a mining base here."

"That's what I've heard too, but who knows the truth," he commented, picking the nose. "You know a lot of times rumors fly

and truth walks. Perhaps there's tons of gold hidden in the North Slope Mine, and that was why His Majesty sent his son down here... After all, they're blood-related."

"Hang on. What's that?!" Across the square, Otto suddenly caught a glimpse of two big colorful balloons floating in the air. Below hung a banner, which read "Welcome to Border Town" on one side, and "Join Now to Obtain the Citizen Welfare" on the other.

"The stuff above or below?" The captain replied, pouting, "I don't know much about the floating balls up there, but as to the one below... You can go to the east of the square where the Lord's notices are usually posted. The banner says they're recruiting tourists, tradesmen, and refugees from all over the world."

"Even refugees?" Otto asked in dismay, "What's the citizen welfare?"

"Allowance for work, food for the first two months and a shelter. Sounds pretty awesome, eh?" The captain explained airily, "It isn't that easy to get approved. Many of my crews have tried, but none of them passed. The Lord wants someone who's loyal, not a believer of the church and has no criminal records. But holy cricket, theft is also a crime. All sailors stole at some point in their lives, don't you think? Plus, it looks very bustling here, but in fact, there're also lots of downsides as far as I can tell."

"Such as?"

"Barely any entertainment. No casinos or whorehouses, not even

a hooker on the street." He coughed out a spit and continued to complain, "Wouldn't you be bored to death living in a place like this?"

The marketplace was to the north of the square. Otto decided to first take a look by himself while the captain and his crews were delivering the goods. According to the captain, there were plenty of rare finds in the convenience market on this side and the high-end market on the other. Indeed there were. Otto saw lines of racks filled with various goods. Once he lingered a little longer at a booth, there would be someone coming up to greet him. No matter what the result of the negotiation with Prince Roland would be, Otto knew this town had already drawn his attention.

Just then, there was a stir among the multitude.

Otto turned around and saw two ladies heading toward this side.

One of them was wearing a black gown with a long dark ponytail. She had fine eyes, a cute nose and plump lips. But the coldness on her face made her look unapproachable. The other one, was completely different, looking soft and gentle. The traits of her every character were elegant and graceful like a warm spring breeze. Her gorgeous blonde hair reflected a shimmer of golden rays of the dawn.

Otto felt all his blood rushed to his head at the sight of the blonde lady.

He rubbed his eyes over and over again, hands slightly trembling,

and was sure it was her...

"Andrea Quinn!" Unable to restrain his excitement, Otto shouted aloud in the crowd.

Chapter 433: Unrequited Love

...

"Enjoy." The maid placed some wine on the table and gave the three people a strange glance. "If you need a refill, just pull the rope near the door."

"Got it. You're excused." Otto waved his hand, and the maid bowed and left. When the door closed, the ruckus in the lobby was blocked out, and the room immediately fell silent.

Even now, his heart was still racing, and he stared intensely at Andrea, as if he was afraid she would suddenly disappear. "I thought this was a dream. Belinda and Oro both think you're dead, and I never thought I'd see you again..."

Otto's loud outburst in the market caused Andrea to stare at him; since she responded to this name, this meant that she wasn't just a lookalike.

In fact, she couldn't be anyone else, since Andrea's outstanding beauty and air of elegance were unparalleled among other girls.

However, she wasn't as excited to see him as he had expected, and instead, she frowned, walked up to him, and sternly ordered him to follow her as she exited the market.

"She probably didn't want to cause a scene. Yes, that's right, the

noble shouldn't draw attention to themselves when among commoners. I was being rude."

He followed the two people into a private room in a pub and finally got a chance to take a closer look at Andrea. Even after five years, she still looked the same as he remembered. If this was a dream, he hoped that it would last a little longer.

"This is your ex-lover?" The dark-haired girl whistled in awe.

"Since you insisted on coming, you should know when to keep your mouth shut," Andrea said with a glare. "Even if you stay quiet, no one will think you're mute."

"I came to protect you," said the other girl with a grin. "Besides, you dragged me here to buy Tilly a birthday present, so kicking me out now would be an improper behavior for a noblewoman."

"That depends on who the behavior is directed to." Andrea scoffed. "I don't have to be proper towards you."

"This is ..." Otto didn't get a response from Andrea and felt a little awkward, so he turned to the equally stunning dark-haired girl. "... your friend?"

"Ashes," she said quickly before Andrea could respond. "Who are you, and why do you know her?"

"I'm Otto Luoxi, and I come from the Kingdom of Dawn." He was

slightly taken aback by her interrogating tone—this Ashes girl spoke too bluntly and incisively to be an educated noblewoman, so why was Andrea in her company? "I've known Andrea since we were children, along with my sister Belinda, Oro Tokat, and the eldest son of the King of Dawn, His Highness Appen. We were all extremely close."

"Sounds like a bunch of rich brats." Ashes shrugged. "You said she died?"

"That's because..."

"That's enough." Andrea interrupted. "Belinda and Oro are right—the lady of the Quinn Family whom you knew is dead."

"But you're right here." Otto shook his head. "What happened?"

Besides the royal family, the most powerful families in the City of Glow, the capital of the Kingdom of Dawn, were the Tokat, Quinn and Luoxi families, because their heads were the King's trusted friends and held high positions. This tradition had been passed down since the founding of the Kingdom of Dawn and remained the same for Otto's generation.

Andrea was the eldest daughter of the Quinn family and was outstanding in her appearance and background, so she naturally had many suitors, including Otto and Oro.

However, no one expected that during a spring outing, Andrea's

carriage would go out of control and fall into a canyon, an accident that even startled the king. The three families combined their efforts to search for her, and ages later, they found her battered body at the foot of the mountains.

After hearing about this, Otto was depressed for a long time, because while Oro had already begun pursuing Andrea, he had not yet expressed his feelings to her. He never thought he would get the chance to do it, and he would never have expected to see her again in this foreign land.

After a long pause, Andrea sighed. "It wasn't an accident."

"W... what?"

"The carriage accident five years ago was all planned by my family," she whispered. "Father found out that I was a witch."

Otto was startled. "A witch?"

"Seems like you did a pretty good job of hiding your powers," Ashes said, covering her mouth, "since you were even able to fool your childhood friends."

Andrea ignored her. "Yes. After father learned this, he immediately arranged for the accident to be staged—I wasn't even in the carriage, and a driver and maid lost their lives for me. Then, I was sent away from the Kingdom of Dawn and settled secretly in Palisade City of the Kingdom of Graycastle." She paused. "He never

actually asked for my opinion on the matter and didn't care what I thought because he was only focused on getting rid of me as quickly as possible."

"So that's what happened..." Otto fell silent. "The beloved 'Flower of Glow' is actually a witch. If word of this gets out, it'll greatly damage the Quinn Family name." However, the staged accident also protected Andrea from harm—as a member of the upper noble, he had heard many tragic stories about the sufferings of witches who fell into the hands of the church.

After some hesitation, he shared his thoughts with Andrea, but she interrupted him with a cold chuckle.

"Protect? As long as father didn't give me up, what could the church have done? Sent the Judgement Army straight into the inner city to arrest me?" She raised her voice. "He was Prime Minister to the King of Dawn and controlled the outer city's surveillance teams, but he didn't do anything to help me. Nana's father was only a Baron, but for the sake of his daughter, he went straight to the Lord's castle and demanded mercy from His Highness Roland, while my father simply banished me from my home. Do you call that protecting me?"

Otto was at a loss for words, and after a long and awkward silence, he finally said hesitantly, "Are... are you going back?"

"Never." Andrea stood up. "I already said that the lady of the Quinn family died five years ago, which was exactly what father wanted."

"Oro still leaves flowers at your grave every year. He can't forget you."

She walked up to the door and whispered, "His love is one-sided, so he'll forget me one day."

As Otto watched the two people disappear from view, he lay helplessly on his chair.

He was beginning to hate his cowardice.

Even at that moment, he still only mentioned Oro instead of expressing his own feelings.

I can't forget you either.

He closed his eyes.

Chapter 434: The Birthday Gift

Roland learned from Anna that Tilly got her twentieth birthday coming.

He hadn't thought about such a thing until now.

It wasn't because he was careless, but because Prince Roland's memories were like a database that he would only delve into when necessary. However, his memories rarely contained anything related to politics or occultism and mostly consisted of mischievous wrongdoings and ideas for pranks, so he revisited them less and less.

Moreover, Tilly was a sore spot for Prince Roland, so everything related to her had little significance and had been buried away, as if he didn't want to recall them.

Tilly's birthday didn't mean her Day of Awakening, but her actual day of birth—as an Extraordinary, she didn't even know the time when she awoke as a witch, and she wouldn't experience the feeling of biting by magic power when the Months of Demons came around. Therefore, her birthday was her only important milestone.

Roland scrolled through his memories and realized that since Tilly was the Queen's youngest child, King Wimbledon III used to throw her a birthday celebration in the Inner City every winter when he was still alive, which was a luxury that even his favorite child, Timothy, never received. However, besides this, he usually

ignored Tilly and showed no interest in her life. Otherwise, Prince Roland wouldn't have dared to bully his little sister so much.

As he continued scrolling back, he found another interesting piece of memory.

Tilly's celebration on her eighteenth birthday was her most extravagant one, even surpassing the rite of passage ceremony that followed. Not only did the four border guardians come to the King's City for this celebration, but there were also gifts from the Kingdom of Dawn, the Kingdom of Wolfheart, and the Kingdom of Everwinter, and even the Fjord Islands sent an emissary delegation.

Timothy and Garcia were extremely jealous and wanted to teach Tilly a lesson that she wasn't father's favorite child—the only one reason why King Wimbledon III threw her these celebrations was to make up for the loss of his queen and to console the spirit of Tilly's deceased mother.

No matter how Roland felt about this theory, they both believed it at the time, so they tried to convince Prince Roland to carry out their plan on his sister. However, after Tilly taught him a lesson eight years ago, he was too scared to mess with this girl who seemed meek at first glance but had the spirit of resistance in the depth of her heart , so he refused. The two siblings were forced to act on their own.

Prince Roland didn't know how they did it, but Tilly's favorite gift, the bear cubs from the Kingdom of Wolfheart, was somehow poisoned—as he watched his little sister dully cradling the dead

bears, Roland realized the prince had actually felt entertained.

No wonder he was the scum of the royal family. Besides murder and arson, Prince Roland had done every awful thing under the sun.

Either way, this was definitely an awful memory for Tilly Wimbledon.

After he finished scrolling through his memories, Roland suddenly came up with an idea for a gift.

He took out a sheet of paper and began drawing the picture of his gift.

"What's this?" Nightingale peeked him from behind. "A bear?"

"Yes, a stuffed bear, the one you can sleep with at night." Roland smiled.

Judging from his limited gift-giving experience, he knew that most girls loved cute and furry gifts, and a life-sized stuffed animal was the perfect combination of these two features. Of course, a simple stuffed animal was too easy and common. As a prince with a group of witches to assist him, he could do much better.

...

On Tilly's birthday, Roland carried her gift to her room.

She was alone when she opened the door and was slightly surprised to see him. "Why do you come over?"

"Today is your birthday, so I'll host a celebratory feast in the castle tonight," Roland said with a smile, "but before that, I have a gift for you."

"A gift?" Tilly said, taken aback. "Is it what you're carrying?" She turned around and said, "Come in."

"Um... It's a little bit big, but I promise it's very special." The prince mopped the sweat on his forehead and placed the gift on the floor. The noble during this time usually gave small and delicate gifts, such as flowers and rings, so that they could hide them in their robes and take them out as a surprise. Roland carrying a large wrapped paper box was definitely a rare sight—and this thing was much heavier than he imagined.

"You've never given me anything before," Tilly said in a mysterious tone.

"I gave you a goose feather quill when you were born." Roland corrected it. "But it wasn't anything valuable."

"Alright, it's a Graycastle royal tradition." She shrugged. "What about this? Can I open it?"

"Of course."

Roland smiled as he watched her untie the ribbons, and when the box fell open, he heard her gasp quietly.

"What... what's this?" Tilly blinked.

"It's a bear!" Roland said with a grin.

"What kind of bear looks like this." She circled the stuffed animal curiously and patted it. "It's so soft..."

Its fur cover was specially made by Soraya according to the fur of Northern wolf cubs and added a silky soft touch. As for the design... Roland completely based it off of the future's pandas. As an animal that had survived millenniums by simply acting cute and had even been used as diplomatic gifts, it was exceptionally cute.

"I've never seen this kind of bear... Its color is so strange..."

"You don't like it?"

"No, I mean..." Tilly seemed to be at a loss for words, but her eyes, which were flashing with excitement, revealed her true thoughts.

"It's called 'panda', and it's a... widely-loved animal."

She quickly understood what he meant. "This belongs to your other world..."

Roland nodded. "And it's not just a stuffed animal you can hold. Try pinching its neck."

Tilly did as he advised, and the panda suddenly started to move, wave its legs and try to climb on top of Tilly. She covered her mouth in shock and backed away, while the stuffed animal continued to move its legs and walk slowly towards her.

This was why it was so heavy—Roland had installed connecting rods and gears in its body with small generators in each leg, and the generators' power came from miniature Dawn I engines. As he lowered the magnetic flux, its shelf life was greatly extended, lasting up to three or four months without use or four fifths of the time if used frequently. Even if Tilly returned to the Sleeping Island, the panda would still accompany her for a long time.

"Pinch its neck again, and it'll stop." Roland smiled. "I hope you'll like this gift."

This time, even though Tilly didn't respond, her expression told Roland everything he needed to know.

Chapter 435: Arrested

"Why do you... want to give me this?" After a while, Tilly put down the muppet.

"Do you remember what happened on your 18th birthday?" Roland asked slowly.

"..." She pursed her lips and asked, "You did that?"

"No, it was Timothy and Garcia." The prince told the story again. "But I should also take some responsibility. If I had told father, it wouldn't have happened."

"And they also would have beaten you up," Tilly said, "so it was reasonable for you not to tell."

"This sort of thing will never happen again."

"I thought that the extra space in your head was used to store knowledge." She didn't respond and changed the topic. "Now it seems that's not the case. Besides this 'panda', is there anything else new? "

When he heard her get tongue-tied trying to pronounce this strange word, Roland couldn't help but smile. "Of course... countless things. When I get a chance, I'll tell you more."

There was no doubt that Tilly was smart. He believed that she would understand him even if he didn't tell the whole story.

Sure enough, after pausing for a moment, she stared at Roland with thoughtful eyes.

Suddenly, Andrea's voice sounded through the door. "Lady Tilly, I want to give you a gift... You, go away!"

"I came first, OK?" Ashes' voice immediately followed.

"I was the first one!"

Roland laughed and stood up. "Indeed, a lot of unpleasant things had happened before, but the past is the past. No matter what, you and me, or Border Town and Sleeping Island shouldn't be bound by bad memories. If you have any trouble in the future, you can come to me anytime... I'll be your elder brother forever." He paused for a while and said, "Happy birthday, Tilly."

He opened the door. The two witches were immediately stupefied and stared at each other with confusion.

The prince smiled and said, "Stop quarreling, I was the first."

Otto wandered the streets dejectedly with Andrea's words still

lingering in his mind.

"...the lady of the Quinn family died five years ago, which was exactly what father wanted."

He didn't agree with her, but he couldn't find any excuses to contradict her with. These days, besides observing Border Town, he spent the rest of his time wandering near the market. He hoped to see her again, but was ultimately disappointed.

Otto went to the stone bench next to the square, flicked away the snow on top, and sat down slowly.

Although thoughts were surging in his heart, he still didn't forget the reason why he came here. Except for the corps and battalions, he had gone through every corner of this village and had a comprehensive understanding of this area. For example, the villagers' lives weren't so affluent at the very beginning and had been no different from those of regular slums. All these changes were due to the Lord, His Highness Roland Wimbledon. He led the people against those bloodcurdling demonic beasts and invented various magical machines and tools to improve people's lives.

Otto had witnessed the black machines operating in the mine area. Just two or three iron lumps could easily finish the work of tens of people.

Also, it was said that the high tower alongside the Redwater River could send water to each resident's home.

There were the quickly built city walls, residential communities, and docks as well.

In addition, it seemed that the ditches that were being dug would make the installation of heating equipment easier, and the inhabitants would no longer fear the cold—news like this could be seen on the bulletin board in the center of the square every day. More astonishingly, most of the villagers could understand the official documents on the board.

The more he observed, the more astonished he felt. Changes were happening everywhere in Border Town and were totally beyond his imagination.

Opening his notebook, Otto intended to take down today's new discoveries, but someone suddenly grabbed the hand holding his pen.

Looking up, he saw two patrol officers with black uniforms in front of him. "Are you Silver Eye?"

That was a false name he used when disguised as a businessman. Otto answered calmly and when he looked around, he found out that there were also people with black uniforms appearing on the other two sides of the square. However, they just stared at him and didn't come closer.

They came here for me.

Otto's heart sank. Before, he thought that the patrols here weren't like what he saw elsewhere and behaved appropriately, so he didn't expect to get into trouble.

"What's up?" he asked with a cold voice. Faced with these bullying and greedy people, there was no benefit in flattering them. Even if they wanted to blackmail him, he wouldn't let them run their mouths. In the worst case, he would have to use his identity as a nobleman.

However, the uniformed officers' answer surprised him. "According to the report we received, we suspect that you are conducting espionage. Now, keep your hands behind you and follow our instructions. If there is any resistance, we can't guarantee your safety."

"Espionage? What a strange reason... Could it be that they want to find a fall guy?" Otto thought silently. "I don't understand what you are saying." He shook off their arms. "I'm from the Luoxi Family in the City of Glow, a noble of the Kingdom of Dawn. I'm not a..."

As soon as he shook off their hands, his belly was suddenly punched severely, and more than half of his strength disappeared immediately with an acidic taste filling his mouth and his body curling up involuntarily. Then, the two men knocked him down into the cold snow, and his hands were tied together with ropes.

"A noble? You said you were a businessman several days ago." One of them sneered.

"I told you not to resist." The other man gave him another hard kick. "You asked for it."

"Several days ago? Does this mean they have targeted me for a while? This is impossible... At least no patrol guards noticed me in the first two days."

"Ahem... I'm indeed a nobleman, and the writ... is in my bag." Otto struggled for a while, but the men ignored him.

"Save your excuses for His Excellency Carter." Two men lifted him up. "If you're honest, you may get to survive."

...

After staying in jail for a day, Otto felt hungry and thirsty and finally saw the one whom people called His Excellency Carter.

Before the knight could say a word, he gripped the iron bars and blurted, "I'm really the Otto Luoxi from the City of Glow in the Kingdom of Dawn. Entrusted by the King of Dawn, I came to this Kingdom of Graycastle for allies to confront the church. I'm not the spy you accused me to be! I want to meet with your Lord, His Highness Roland Wimbledon!"

He had long heard about the shady dealings in jail. Patrols always colluded with Rats and imprisoned foreigners to be scapegoats. If they thought that he was an unimportant stranger, he probably

wouldn't live to see another day.

Carter was shocked. "I haven't asked you anything yet." He turned his head. "What do you think my answer will be?"

Then, in a scene that shocked Otto, a girl came out from the shadow, her body covered by a white robe and her face concealed by a hood. However, judging from her figure, she seemed no different from the "Flower of Glow".

"What he said is true," she shrugged and said.

"Really? Does this mean he's indeed an envoy from the Kingdom of Dawn?" Carter put his hand on his forehead. "It seems that we caused some trouble for His Highness."

Chapter 436: The Indeterminable Appointment

Finally, Otto met the legendary Prince Roland of the Kingdom of Graycastle.

After confirming he was a nobleman of the Kingdom of Dawn, Carter brought him into the castle. Then, as the attendants served him with toiletries, new clothes, and some hot food, Carter frisked him.

This might be the most offensive reception that Otto had ever seen.

Prince Roland was in a north-facing room on the castle's third floor. The French windows, which occupied half of the wall, first came into sight as the door was opened. The snow-covered landscape brightened up the room, which was particularly warm, despite there being no lit fireplace.

The prince was sitting at a mahogany table, reading a black-covered book in his hand, which Otto realized was his own notebook. In addition, the diplomatic documents and the family seal were set on the side. It seemed that the hotel that he was staying in had been searched thoroughly.

Although Prince Roland had the same gray hair as Timothy, and there was some resemblance in their features, they gave people an entirely different impression. Both his sitting position and expression seemed to be very casual which conformed to the

rumors that Prince Roland liked to persist in his old ways.

Noticing Otto, he closed the book, smiled and said, "Are you the envoy from the Kingdom of Dawn? Have a seat."

Otto bowed in accordance with noble etiquette. No matter how awful the prince behaved, he had to do this—after all, although Prince Roland might not care if he was treated as a joke, he represented the royal dignity of the Kingdom of Dawn.

"I have read some of your notes," the prince laughed and said. "Some were recorded in great detail, so it's not surprising for them to mistake you for a spy. Also, my people didn't know where you were from, and they enthusiastically reported you to me because of my orders. I'd like to apologize to you here."

"The people... reported me?" Otto frowned and thought. However, no explanation could excuse rudely offending a noble, not to mention that the offender was just a man without any title of nobility. If it wasn't for his mission, he would definitely ask the prince to bring the man who assaulted him to justice. Otto restrained his innermost negative emotion and said, "No, you don't have to. Your Highness, you just do this for the peace of the people. It's just... that it may hurt innocent strangers, and I'm afraid most people couldn't provide documents to prove their identities like me."

"You don't need to worry about that. The collection of evidence by the judicial department is irrelevant to the identification documents, and we have all kinds of measures to protect the innocent people." Prince Roland waved his hand and continued,

"What's the saying? We would never wrong a good man or let a single bad one go." At this, he smiled and said, "I heard about your arrest—if you did as they commanded, then you wouldn't have been harmed. The process was a little brutal but it's also done with reluctance. You know, some of the most vicious people may take out a weapon and fight back at any time. Since the winter, two police officers have been injured while making arrests."

"Police officers... It might refer to those patrols. What's a judicial department? The administration to supervise patrols?" Otto wondered and asked, "Does this kind of thing happen often?"

"Once or twice a month," said the prince, "and it's probably because Timothy is so bored in this endless winter."

The prince openly showed his hostility toward the new king. Otto realized that the contradictions between the two sides couldn't be reconciled. Then he hesitated for a while and said, "When I went to the King's City, I heard a rumor... Your Highness, are you really going to overthrow Timothy's authority?"

"Did the rumor say that the new king's throne is hung by a thread?" The prince said bluntly, "Timothy shouldn't be the new king—in order to usurp the throne, he murdered his father, blamed it on his elder brother, and expelled Garcia out of the Kingdom of Graycastle. The entire Southern Territory was destroyed in the war, and the people became destitute and homeless—these are all the crimes he had committed. The only way to restore the past prosperity of the Kingdom of Graycastle is to overthrow him."

Otto held his breath for a second and thought, "Roland Wimbledon is more active than Timothy; at least Timothy's fighting resolve isn't so strong... It seems to be a reversal of both status and momentum."

He cleared his throat and said, "So, as a friendly neighbor, the Kingdom of Dawn hopes that the Kingdom of Graycastle could soon regain peace. I came here at this time to bring the alliance agreement of Deegan Moya, the King of Dawn."

"Oh?" said the prince with interest, "Where is it?"

"In order to avoid the message being leaked, I didn't carry the document with me. However, His Majesty has granted me the right to sign the agreement." Otto repeated the alliance agreement again. "If the two countries can help each other, we can effectively hold the church in play and avoid going down the same road as the Kingdoms of Everwinter and Wolfheart."

"That's it?"

The response of the prince perplexed Otto. "What does 'that's it' mean? I've made myself quite clear," he thought. As he was about to repeat his words, the prince shook his head and said, "The project might not work. The determination of the church to annex the Four Kingdoms is much stronger than you think, let alone the combative God's Punishment Army and witches—your troops stationed along the border might be surrounded and destroyed by the enemy before they've even departed."

"God's Punishment Army and... witches?" asked Otto in surprise.

"It seems that you know nothing about the ambition of the church," said Prince Roland. He took a sip of tea and continued, "I'll tell you all the information we know, and I hope you can bring these messages back to the Kingdom of Dawn so that your king can re-examine the alliance agreement. If we want to defeat the church, we need not only a deterrent, but one big attack."

The meeting didn't come to an end until the evening when the Prince put his cup down, and the wilderness and forest behind him were all in the dark. A strange light lit up in the room, which was brighter and purer than a candle, but Otto had no mind to notice this. He felt his clothes soaked with cold sweat on his back, his hands inadvertently held into a fist, his palms were creamy, and the words of the prince were echoing in his mind.

"The extraordinary warriors created by utilizing wild witches, secret combat witches, and pure witches... And the purpose of the church to eliminate the Four Kingdoms at all costs is to usher in the coming Battle of Doomsday! The news was just too incredible!"

However, many details coincided with the information that he had collected, such as the Pill of Madness, which the church used to weaken the resistance of the kingdom; the carriages transporting female orphans to the Holy City; and their attitude towards the defeated nobles—if it was to completely erase the influence of the nobility to achieve a completely united kingdom of the church, all these things would make sense.

"I... I can't make a decision," Otto stammered. "These matters are

too important. I have to report to His... His Majesty first."

"Of course, this is a matter of life and death for the two countries," the prince calmly said, "and you can't be too careful. But don't forget, our time is running out."

...

Ready to leave, Otto went to the door, hesitantly turned around and said, "Your Highness, I heard that a group of witches was recruited to Border Town... I wonder if you've heard of the name Andrea."

"Ah, she used to be a noblewoman of the Kingdom of Dawn, but unfortunately she became homeless and came into the Kingdom of Graycastle afterward." The prince lifted his eyebrows and asked, "Why? Do you know her?"

"Yes!" answered Otto with his heart beating strongly. "Could you... allow me to see her?"

The prince nodded and said, "I can help to arrange it, but whether or not she'll meet you will be up to her."

"Isn't Andrea your..."

He shook his head with a smile and said, "The witches are just the citizens who live here, not my servants—I can't manipulate their minds."

Chapter 437: A Silent Farewell

After Otto Luoxi left the office, Nightingale stood by Roland. "What he's said isn't completely true, especially the part about his experience before he came to Border Town."

"No surprise. He must have negotiated with Timothy in King's City before coming to the Western Region." Roland smiled. "It would be very strange if he came directly to me first. A diplomat always hedges his bets. If I were him, I wouldn't put all my eggs in one basket either."

"You mean... they might not stand on our side?"

"At least, they won't hurry to make a decision." He picked up the kettle to refill his tea cup. "When the King of Dawn receives this news, how much of it do you think he will believe?"

Nightingale searched for an answer for quite a while until she finally said, "I... don't know."

"Me neither." At these words, Nightingale pinched Roland's shoulder. He was not telling the truth. "One thing is obvious though. The King of Dawn is probably not going to swing to us because of this news. It sounds terrifying but it's something that will only happen several years from now. Besides, we can't even give him an exact date. The threat of the church, however, is right under his nose. Given that the church may launch the attack in the coming spring, he's most likely to stand by watching battles between Timothy and me until either of us wins. If he's clever

enough, he'll probably be on good terms with both of us for future returns."

Politicians often handled these kinds of issues this way. They preferred smooth gains to risky investments, especially in the case of wars which were normally highly profitable. If there had been no threat from demons, Roland would have been happy to join this game, setting a trap for his opponent and then reaping some profits. But he was not in the mood for this diplomatic game now. In the following year, Border Town would have to launch an attack and stabilize the situation. A storm was brewing, and the ones who had a narrow vision and concentrated on immediate interests would have no future.

"Is it... good for us to tell them the news?" Nightingale asked in doubt.

"The Kingdom of Dawn isn't our real enemy, after all. I'm not sure how much the nobles there will believe the story about demons, but they'll definitely spread the word about the church's ambition. It'll weaken the ruling of the church," Roland explained. "Without people's support, the church won't be able to use the kingdom's resources that easily."

When he broke the news to Otto, he only mentioned the part about demons, but not the part about the witches' empire and the two Battles of Divine Will.

The former was even more unbelievable than the existence of demons and might cause unwanted effects. It could be purposely distorted into a "witches' scheme" because of people's general

hostility towards them.

The latter might shake people's confidence in fighting against the demons. They had failed twice before. What were their chances of winning this time?

Anyhow, he had already hinted that the two kingdoms should fight the demons together. As to the result, it would depend on the reply from the Kingdom of Dawn.

...

Three days later, Roland met Otto Luoxi again,

He could guess the answer from the disappointment in Otto's eyes.

"Personally, I'm more inclined to the alliance, but the priority now is to send the news to the Kingdom of Dawn as soon as possible instead of talking about the agreement details." Otto bowed and said, "so I'm here to bid you farewell."

"Hope to hear good news from you then." Roland nodded.

"Besides... Your Highness," Otto hesitated for a moment and said, "I would like to ask you a personal favor."

"What is it?"

"Please take good care of Andrea Quinn for me."

"Andrea was a witch from Sleeping Island. You should actually ask Tilly Wimbledon to do that, not me," Roland thought with a sigh, but still he gave his promise.

At the top of the castle, Andrea stood, facing the howling wind and looking south toward the Redwater River.

"Aren't you... going to the dock?" Shavi shivered in coldness, hiding behind her invisible barrier. "I hear he's going to lea-leave by boat. As a childhood playmate, you shou-should go to wish him a good trip."

"I can wish him one here, too." She heaved a sigh.

"A-Ashes said he never stops thinking about you."

"Don't listen to anything she's said," Andrea grunted. "She even praised that guy in front of Lady Tilly. A filthy mouth will never utter decent language."

"Eh, is, is that so?" Shavi said, her teeth chattering.

"Yes." She snorted. She noticed Shavi shivering. "If you feel that

cold, go down now. You can come back to fetch me later."

"It's, it's OK, I'll wait for you here." Shavi shook her head. "If, if I catch a cold, Miss Lily will cure me and I can take two, two days off. Then I'll have more time to play cards."

"That sounds reasonable." Andrea gave her a thumbs up and turned her gaze to the Redwater River. Through the falling snow, she could vaguely see some rising sails and something red fluttering at the top of a mast.

It was the sailing signal.

This was good. Time would dilute all the attention and forgetting would be better for everyone, she thought.

Andrea somehow knew Otto's love for her, but she still chose to avoid him. Both he and Oro Tokat should marry someone more suited to their status. They were the most famous noble families in the City of Glow. A relationship with either of them was doomed from the start. Besides, she was not willing to return to the land which had abandoned her.

Avoiding him was the best choice.

"Farewell, my friend," Andrea thought.

The looming sails soon disappeared on the horizon.

After sending off the messenger, Roland threw himself into the construction of Border Town.

The Tee Project which included a water supply, a power supply, and a heating system had officially launched. The three pipes were embedded in underground tunnels, reaching every residential community. It was easy to adapt each household because every residential house had been designed with reserve openings for the pipes. The key lay in the location of boilers and water towers.

In order to save materials and reduce loss during transportation as much as they could, Roland changed the plan. Instead of drawing water from the Redwater River, they would draw from underground springs. Given that Border Town was rich in underground water and the it was not deep, it was easy to dig wells. Besides, in this era, there was no need to take water pollution into consideration. With the help of Sylvie, Roland quickly picked out four spots as water access points for the town. They could purvey water not only for daily uses such as drinking and cleansing, but also for the heating system and boilers.

Chapter 438: Electricity And Light

Based on the construction plan, Roland set up a workroom with all the equipment to build an efficient Three Supplies Project system.

The complete set of equipment included a steam engine, an electric motor, a power supply unit, a boiler, and two water tanks. Together with the water tower outside the room, they formed the workings of the Three Supplies Project system.

The steam engine pumped the water up into the water tower and the water tanks. The former was to provide the residential communities with water for domestic needs. The latter was the water supply for the boiler and the heating system. The first-level water tank was higher. Limestones and washing stones which were used to soften the water by precipitating magnesium and calcium ions in it were put inside the tank. The water in it would then flow into the lower second-level tank through a filter screen specially made by Soraya, which would stop the floating objects in the water from entering the second-level tank.

The boiler's water supply was controlled by an electric motor. When the water level inside the boiler was too low, the ballcock inside would start the electric motor to bring water in until the water level got back to normal. This process was more stable than both the manual control and the steam engine system, saving the trouble to arrange someone to observe the site all the time.

The water supply and heating systems had already been successfully tested. Roland was confident that their construction

would go smoothly. His current focus was on the power supply. It was a brand new thing for the town. Neither Karl nor other members of the Mason Guild had any idea of electricity. Given that Roland did not know much about electricity himself either, and that all his knowledge of electronic circuits remained at the high-school level, he decided to build a model in his courtyard first. If he succeeded, he would explain it to the Ministry of Construction.

Once he had a stable power supply, the first step then was to create that traditional emblem of electrical power: a light bulb.

With that in mind, Roland put on a thick coat and set out for his courtyard on the North Slope Mountain.

It normally would take a quarter of an hour to walk to the courtyard, but with the help of Nightingale's mist, they arrived in scarcely four minutes.

When the wooden door was pushed open, Anna and Lucia immediately noticed Roland. Anna, busy with her work, just nodded to him. Lucia happily ran to him and said, "Your Highness, good morning."

"Good morning," Roland nodded with a smile and then walked to Anna. "What're you busy with?"

"The new gun barrels and locking mechanism." She pointed to several long steel pipes on the desk with a serious look on her face, "Some aspects of your drawings don't make sense. I think it'll be better this way."

"My amazing Anna," Roland thought and could not help stretching out his hand, trying to touch her head but she refused it by rocking back and forth. "Well... this scene seems familiar." He coughed, banished his thoughts of Anna and said, "Good, do whatever you want."

Roland did not mind her questioning his designs. He knew and would naturally have mistakes and shortcomings based on his minimal design experience. He felt like Anna was not only more talented but also had a keener eye for fine detail and he was convinced that one day she would surpass him in skills.

After a while, Anna finished her work and put down her tools . She walked to Roland and lowered her head a little.

"Eh? Is it to make up for the touch just now?" Roland thought in surprise.

He ruffled her soft hair. Anna looked up in satisfaction, "What are we making next?"

"Ah... yes." The prince turned to Lucia. "How did your separation work of ores from the mines go?"

"Almost done and here are the results," Lucia gave him a stack of books and said, "but I'm afraid it'll take a long time to test on the mixtures of them and rolled steel. There are just too many individual elements."

"It's already pretty good," Roland encouraged her.

This was part of his material improvement plan. He had already improved the rolled steel quality by reducing carbon content and eliminating impurities, and now all the elements in the North Slope Mine area could be utilized. They had to try one by one. There was no shortcut.

Roland glanced over the books, looking at the features of the elements separated from ores in the mines. He soon found the element with the highest melting point. He poked his finger at the testing sample marked with No. 12 and asked, "Where are they?"

Lucia quickly found them. They were a crude stone and a bag of elementary particles, both sealed in transparent coated bags.

Roland thought he recognized this crude, black stone from somewhere else.

"Wait, isn't it the same as the black stone sent to my office earlier? I gave it to alchemists and then totally forgot about it. I've never thought twice about it since then."

Could it turn out to be the mineral that has the highest melting point on the North Slope Mountain?"

Anna could not measure the exact temperatures at which the materials melted, so she described them roughly by words such as

"normal", "high" and "relatively high". Only the melting point of No.12 testing sample was described as "extremely high."

The elementary particles in the bag were silvery white, similar to most of the other metallic elements.

He thought, "Is it wolfram?

Whatever, as long as it is difficult to melt."

Roland let Anna make the particles into very fine wire, twisted the wire into a spiral and fix it onto a glass shelf which was then put into a glass bulb. The main part of an electric lamp was completed.

To make it a stable light, there were two more steps which were also considered to be the most difficult part in making electric bulbs. The first one was to evacuate the bulb, preventing the filament wire from reacting with oxygen. The second was sealing it to ensure that the air could not enter the bulb.

Without a doubt, only witches could realize those two steps.

Roland soon thought of Agatha.

The filament would become extremely reactive at high temperatures. It would easily oxidize, produce new oxides, and eventually melt down. That was why the bulb needed vacuum inside, but filling the bulb with inert gases could achieve the same

or an even better effect.

Pure nitrogen was an excellent choice for this.

As nitrogen was lighter than the air, using a simple downward exhaust method, the bulb could be easily filled with nitrogen. It was much simpler than the vacuuming process. When the other end of the exhaust was also pure nitrogen, Soraya quickly sealed the bulb. A simple incandescent lamp was made successfully.

Looking at the electric bulb as small as his palm, Roland felt all sorts of emotions welling up in his mind. It was something outdated but now represented the most advanced manufacturing skills of the town.

The following night, he summoned all the members of City Hall to gather in front of the castle and ordered his guards to put out all the torches in the courtyard.

In this dark, snowy night, Roland switched on the circuit.

All of a sudden, at the center of the courtyard, an orange light lit up. It would not sway and extinguish in the wind like the light of a candle and it never flickered like fire. Though it could merely light up within a radius of a few meters, a stable light in the wind was something that the people had never seen before.

At this moment, everything was self-explanatory.

The fixed look on everyone's face and the silence of the scene told everything.

He had brought electricity to this world.

Chapter 439: The Crime Scene

"Brother Vader, is... this really Okay?" Firehead said while fiddling with her own clothing. "Chief Knight said that our uniforms are the symbol of our status, and thus we must wear it neatly when we're on duty."

"What's more, there's a punishment for dirtying the uniform, let alone for not wearing it." Whistle kept looking left and right as if he was afraid of being spotted by a colleague.

"Stop nagging. It's symbolic enough to wear it. Standing in the midwinter snow in the black uniform will alert everyone in the vicinity that policemen are around. How are we supposed to catch any criminal?" Vader spat on the ground and then continued, "You're both from Border Town, right?"

The two policemen became more spirited the moment Vader mentioned this. "Yes, I am. My father was a hunter who used to live on Old Street, and his skill was remarkable. He was able to strike the neck of a fox scampering about in the woods with only one arrow."

"Me too. But my father often told me that hunting was an unstable career, and he preferred I became a miner. He'd even prepared a hoe for me. Had His Highness Roland not become the new Lord, I would have spent my days in the mines."

"I can tell." Vader shrugged his shoulders. "Only the children of hunters would have such uncommon nicknames," he silently

thought. "Since you're both locals, surely you're more concerned about the public order in the town than I am, right? If even I'm not afraid of being punished, why are you afraid? Is wearing the uniform more important than enforcing the rules and laws laid down by His Highness?"

"Hmm..." The duo hesitated briefly, before they replied with conviction, "You're right."

"But, Brother Vader, you're not an outsider. Haven't you already received your identity card? His Highness once said that anyone who possess the identity card are considered to be his subjects," Whistle muttered.

Vader laughed and did not say a word. Instead, he fixed his gaze on a row of cave dwellings on the eastern side of the temporary housing area.

After serving as a policeman for nearly three months, he had grown fully accustomed to life in the Western Region. Before he became a policeman, he thought that a "patrol team" would have nothing to do apart from extorting and cheating the people. Little did he know that there would be more work than could possibly be completed every day.

The police were required to accept refugees and handle disputes among the citizenry. It was also the police's duty to catch criminals and spies. Whereas, apart from fighting against the demonic beasts, the First Army did not help or intervene in the internal peacekeeping of Border Town.

This was completely different from what he had initially expected.

In Valencia, the patrol team was more like the city guards' backup. They handled menial tasks and were not of much use. This was the reason why many patrollers would seek money from illicit sources. However, in Border Town, the police and the First Army belonged to different systems. The former handled internal affairs while the latter handled external ones.

What surprised Vader more was that the majority of the patrol team's targets came from public reports instead of direct orders from their superiors. Indeed, the citizens of Border Town had changed his perception of commoners. This bunch of lazy and stupid people would actively watch out for suspicious characters and report them to the City Hall. Whenever a foreign merchant ship arrived in the town, the Ministry of Justice would receive a handful of such reports.

Vader soon realized the tremendous power that lied within the town—no foreign spy could shut himself off from the public or integrate into society quickly unless he grew up here. With everyone serving as a vigilant watchdog, what enemy could hide among the populace?

But of course, not every arrest operation would be successful. For example, the sneaky characters whom they arrested during the previous operation turned out to be a noble from the Kingdom of Dawn. Vader was prepared to be punished, but his superiors showed no reaction and seemed unperturbed that he had beaten up

a noble. This served to consolidate his current mentality towards his job.

"Gold's here!" Firehead exclaimed softly.

"Ignore him and just pretend that you're sweeping the snow," Vader said calmly. "He didn't bring any goods, which means he's only here to check on the situation."

"Gold" was the code name of their current target. The Ministry of Justice received a report two days ago that a serf was trafficking grains. His Excellency Carter attached great importance to this issue and immediately assigned the task to Vader. He demanded that the serf was arrested alive together with the goods, and called this the "Gold Hunting Mission".

However, the mission did not start out smoothly. After making some inquiries, they began to uncover the identity of the target. Subsequently, a team of six people took turns to monitor the temporary housing area, but not a single trace of the target was found.

To Vader, it was clear that the reason for the lack of development was because the policemen's uniforms were too conspicuous. He had lived in the Western Zone for some time, and naturally knew that whenever a City Hall official was in the area, news of it would spread rapidly among the residents. It was no different in the Eastern Zone. The people who lived here were serfs, and thus the black uniforms of the policemen were as striking as fireflies in the night sky.

That explained why he was adamant that Firehead and Whistle should take off their uniforms and put on a tattered coat. In this way, they could disguise as snow sweepers and stand on the thoroughfares of the Eastern Zone and Border Town. The suspect would not be able to escape their sights as soon as he appeared.

They saw Gold walking around the Eastern Zone briefly before returning to a cave dwelling. When he reappeared, he was carrying a large sack on his back.

"He's indeed trafficking wheat..." Whistle clenched her fists tightly.

"Damn it! He simply doesn't respect what His Highness has said." Firehead cursed angrily. "We shall arrest him right now!"

"Don't be rash," Vader said and beckoned with his hands. "His Excellency Carter said that he wanted the target arrested alive together with the goods. We shall split three ways and act." His instructions were in accordance with the previous operation to surround Rat. "Firehead, you'll mobilize immediately and go to the old city wall area first. There's only one route for him to enter the inner city."

"Yes."

"I'll follow the target. This requires a lot of skills, and thus I'm the most suitable for this role." He licked his lips in anticipation. "Lastly, Whistle, you shall stalk me from about a 100 steps back.

Remember not to make eye contact with Gold."

"Understood."

"Then, let's begin!"

Although the three policemen were similar in rank, they acted in full compliance with Vader's plan.

Vader carried a broom and calmly walked a couple of steps in front of Gold. According to his experience, following the target from behind would easily arouse the target's suspicions. Instead, by "leading the way", the target would be much less cautious. If he was fairly certain of where the target was heading, this would be the safest method of tracking. He fully concentrated on Gold—he was confident that the instant that he heard a slight change in the target's footsteps, he could trip the target and prevent him from fleeing.

After passing through the old city wall, Gold stopped walking and rested by the corner of a street. He was ostensibly aware that if he headed towards the center of the town, there would be a high chance of encountering policemen. Vader took a dozen more steps forward and turned into a side path, where he waited for the buyer to show up.

A short while later, a local who was pushing a handcart appeared. He looked around the vicinity before he slowly walked up to the serf. After inspecting the contents of the sack, he took out a handful of coins to close the deal. At that very moment, Vader

gestured for the two policemen to act.

The three of them dashed towards the target from different directions. The dealer was so dumbstruck that he did not move at all.

Vader pressed the serf down on the ground, accompanied by the clinking sound of coins scattering all over. He yelled, "You're under arrest!"

Chapter 440: The Court Trial

Roland was studying the power grid layout of a residential district when he heard the news. After Carter had concluded his report, Roland put down his quill pen and sighed lightly. Although he knew that something like this was inevitable, he felt helpless and sad that it truly happened. He had repeatedly publicized the strict ban on private sales of food, yet there were people who still took the risk for the sake of a small profit. As this was the first case of its kind, it was clear to him that a heavy sentence should be issued to deter others.

In addition, he felt the urge to finalize the laws, and then to recruit specialized legal officers to conduct interrogations and handle cases. After all, when the city was fully constructed, criminal cases would only increase, and he would not have time to play judge to all of them.

It was decided that the trial would be conducted in the castle hall.

Roland had requested for Barov to come to the castle, and together, they would hear the case of this food smuggling crime.

In the hall, the two suspects knelt on the floor. Their ghost pale faces and vacant eyes suggested that they were new to this sort of occasion.

Roland took his seat on the throne, cleared his throat, and said, "Explain everything that you did. You'll be doubly guilty if you hold back or lie about anything."

"Yes, yes, Your Highness." The two suspects seemed as if they had just awoken from a dream. They scrambled between themselves to tell their personal accounts of what happened, particularly the serf, who shouted at the top of his voice, "Your Highness, Lord! I know that what I did was wrong, but if I didn't sell the wheat... I wouldn't be able to live on! Those officials didn't buy wheat according to your demand. I'd no choice but to do this!"

The case turned out to be very simple, and Roland cleared his emotions halfway through listening.

In order to reassure the citizens, the City Hall had set the individual quota for purchasing grains to be slightly higher than the actual consumption. Therefore, there would be a small excess of wheat every month. Parker, who resided in the Sixth Residential Area, smelled a business opportunity. He would grind the excess wheat into flour and add in a few of his self-grown herbs to make savory pancakes. It sold well—fortunately, the sale restrictions in the Convenience Market only applied to staples, while poultry and eggs could be freely sold in the stalls.

The business brought in some silver royals for him every month. However, there was only so much excess wheat, and hence, he had to reduce his own consumption in order to expand the scale of the business. Parker thus set his sights on serfs who did not sell all of their food to the City Hall, and soon got in touch with "Gold" to establish this trafficking deal.

However, the serf's final words puzzled Roland. "Why didn't the officials purchase wheat according to the rules? Does this affair

involve the City Hall?"

Roland looked at Barov. The latter faced him back and said softly, "The Ministry of Agriculture is in charge of purchasing. The minister is Sirius Daly, whom I believe is unlikely to have made such a grave mistake. You can call him in for questioning."

Roland nodded and had his guards summon the Minister of Agriculture to the castle.

Sirius Daly rushed to the castle hall, and after making a very impressive Knight's bow towards Roland, he enquired if His Highness had any decree for him. His mannerisms retained the style of the Wolf Family's knights.

The prince delineated the parts of the case which he did not understand. "Did you ever refuse to purchase the serf's grains?"

"Your Highness, this was what happened," Sirius answered without hesitation. "As per your demands, we didn't stop the purchases after the bumper harvest. However, we lowered the purchase price according to the diminishing quality of the wheat. In the first two months, there was little difference between our purchase price and the original price."

Sirius paused before he continued, "After winter arrived, because the majority of serfs didn't have proper storage places for the wheat and they were relocated from the shacks to the temporary housing areas, the quality of the wheat deteriorated substantially. When we do the purchases, we would often find wet, discolored

and moldy food, and therefore our purchase prices reduced by 20 to 30 percent. The food of this particular serf was largely wet, moldy, and couldn't be stored any longer. Therefore, the price that I offered was five times less than during the bumper harvest."

"Your Highness, that's as good as not buying!" The serf shouted. "I spent my entire year working on the farm. This price was even lower than what I would get on Black Street! Didn't you say that the prices wouldn't change?!"

"But you have to sell it on time, idiot!" Barov snapped angrily. "Do you think that nobody knows why you hoarded wheat? Had there been a food supply problem in town, you would have sold your stock at three to four times the usual price!"

Everything about the case became clear. However, the result slightly surprised Roland. He had thought of it as a simple issue of food trafficking, but instead discovered a case of black-hearted food selling. Parker was obviously aware that this batch of grains was of extremely poor quality, and yet he was fine with buying it at half the price on multiple occasions. He probably did not care whether the moldy wheat was actually edible.

While there was no doubt that the serf had committed a grave crime and should be punished heavily, Roland was uncertain about how to punish Parker. He had heard Scroll's stories about the life of the poor. When they had no food to eat, they would satiate their hunger with branches, grass and leaves, let alone moldy bread. This was precisely why Scroll had repeatedly emphasized what a noble and great thing it was for all citizens to be able to eat wheat. Parker used to be poor too, and he was probably not aware that it

was a severe crime to use low-quality ingredients to make pancakes.

After discussing the issue with Barov for a while, Roland finally passed his judgment.

He stood up, looked over the entire audience, and then said solemnly, "I pronounce... the two men guilty! The serf disobeyed the ban and trafficked grain. He knowingly violated the law and hence is doubly guilty. I shall sentence him to ten years of labor in the mines. If his performance and behavior are good, the number of years may be reduced."

"Resident Parker also violated the ban, and furthermore used low-quality wheat to make pancakes which he sold to other citizens. For these two crimes, I shall sentence him to ten years of labor, and a fine equivalent to three times of his earnings from the sale of pancakes. My judgments shall be enforced immediately!"

The two convicts turned feeble and fell on the ground as if paralyzed. The guards standing on one side walked up to them and dragged them out of the hall.

The prince then instructed Sirius. "Write this matter into a bulletin and then hand it to Barov for review and publication. I want to let all citizens know the entire sequence of events, and make sure that this never happens again."

"Yes, Your Highness!"

After the trial ended, Roland summoned Chief Knight to his office. "Did you hear that the person who arrested the criminal was Vader again?"

Carter nodded. "However, they overdid it this time. They took off their uniforms while arresting the criminal, and in the process, they were also reported for getting into a fight with commoners. I'll warn him about this."

"Don't do that. In fact, you should commend him," Roland said, stroking his chin. "Isn't it expected of a plainclothes policeman to adapt to the situation and to understand how to apprehend a criminal? Vader was formerly a patrol team member, and also understands the Black Street Forces well—he's, quite simply, a natural born talent for inspection work."

When the time's right, I shall recruit him into the Security Bureau." Roland quietly thought. "Nightingale's lacking some manpower after all."

Chapter 441: Storm Clouds

It was a secret room of the Tower of Babel in the Hermes Cathedral.

Tayfun stared at the witch across him and couldn't help but sigh.

"Is His Holiness Mayne really so busy?"

"Of course he is." The witch stroked her golden curls. "Otherwise, he wouldn't have sent me to meet you. Let me introduce myself. My name is Isabella, and I'm a Pure Witch of the Supreme Pontiff."

"Your Excellency Tayfun, this..." The other two newly appointed Bishops, Soli Daal of the Judgement Army and El of the Tribunal stared at each other. Although they knew about the church's secret witches, they never expected them to be allowed to participate in such important meetings.

"She's a direct subordinate of the Pope with the same rank as a Bishop—she just doesn't have an official position in the church," explained Tayfun with a sigh. "Bishops can also have their own Pure Witches, so when the Months of the Demons are over, you two can choose a few witches to raise."

"I... I see." Soli widened his eyes. "So... so what kind of powers do they have?"

"This is highly confidential, and only the Supreme Pontiff knows

about it."

"Why would we want to raise witches?" El seemed quite annoyed. "If the believers find out, the church's reputation will be terribly damaged!"

"Of course, they can help you take care of shady business." Isabella raised her eyebrows. "Also, they can sleep with you, let you vent your anger, or do many other things... you should know that witches are completely different from regular women."

"Absurd!"

"Ahem, that's enough." Tayfun coughed. "Your Excellency El, I already said that the Pope's Pure Witches are of equal rank as bishops and should be seen as his representatives, so you should show them some respect. And Lady Isabella, please refrain from making these jokes. They aren't as old and near death as me, and might get very angry at what you said."

"As you wish, Your Excellency," Isabella said with a smile.

"Hmph." El uttered a nasal sound and ignored the witch.

"Then let's get to business," Tayfun said, stroking his beard. "Do you have anything to report?"

"I don't understand why His Holiness Mayne is suddenly asking all of the local church groups to send their captured witches to the

Holy City. Even if it's to create God's Punishment Army, it's still a high price to pay." El took the lead and said. Her tone sounded harsh probably because of her anger towards the Pure Witch. "Ever since the order was passed, we've captured three witches. While they were being sent over, one broke out of her cage and killed the accompanying guards, and we have yet to find her."

"Wasn't she restrained by a 'metal leash'?" asked Soli.

"Not all churches are equipped with the most advanced God's Locket of Retribution," said El annoyedly. "We lost 16 believers to this witch, including four who were supposed to become Judgement Warriors. If something like this happens again, people might be too afraid to capture witches."

"But we all know that combat witches are a minority, and most of the Fallen aren't capable of fighting back, so this kind of issue is very rare," said Isabella nonchalantly. "Also, every time you bring back a wild witch, the church can gain two new God's Punishment Warriors, so I shouldn't have to explain to you which is more important."

"I agree with Lady Isabella," Soli said, nodding his head. "With the stress on Hermes' line of defense increasing every day, we desperately need more God's Punishment Warriors to fight the demonic beasts. One God's Punishment Warrior has the fighting ability of three or four Judgement Warriors, and even more Warriors-in-training."

"Since the Supreme Pontiff has made his decision, we should just carry it out to the best of our ability." Tayfun turned to Soli Daal

and asked, "What's the situation at our line of defense?"

"Very difficult. Regular demonic hybrids are easy to deal with, but every time a Fearful Beast of Hell appears, a God's Punishment Warrior gets injured or killed." Soli shook his head. "Burying snow powder and detonating it is a good idea, but we can't guarantee that they walk over the snow powder every time."

"His Holiness has also considered this," said Isabella frankly, "and he plans to use the 'Siege Beast' ahead of time."

"What's that?"

"A siege weapon controlled by Pure Witches with a range, accuracy, and power that far exceed those of the mangonel, and the key to conquering the Kingdom of Wolfheart," explained the Pure Witch. "The 'Siege Beast' was originally used to fight demons and giant demonic beasts, so since the Fearful Beasts of Hell showed up early, we should start using it."

"Why didn't we use it from the beginning?" Soli asked confusedly.

"Because of the potential damage." Isabella shrugged. "We can't build new ones and can only repair parts of it."

"So where did it come from?" El asked with a frown.

"This is top secret, so you don't have the clearance to know."

"You..."

As the secret room fell quiet, Tayfun broke the silence by clapping his hands and saying, "Alright, since you all brought bad news, I shall share a piece of good news. Besides a few cities in the Kingdom of Wolfheart that are still resisting, all the other nobles have pledged their allegiance to us, just like the weaklings in the Kingdom of Everwinter did. There'll be more believers joining the church, and by next summer, the Holy City's resources and Judgement Army will double in size. Also, the Kingdom of Dawn caused an uprising because of its hostility against believers, and our people are secretly helping them fight the noble, which might last until the end of the Months of the Demons."

"Finally, some good news." El sighed. "I thought the church was done for."

"What kind of nonsense are you talking about?" Soli glared at her. "Aren't we progressing exactly according to our plan?"

"Good job." Isabella nodded approvingly and glanced at the three bishops. "Since you're all done talking, I'll share the Supreme Pontiff's new order."

The three archbishops all immediately looked at the Pure Witch.

"His Holiness orders that we adjust next year's attacks by targeting the Kingdom of Graycastle first and the Kingdom of Dawn last."

"What?" Soli Daal was stunned. "But all of our strategies were made in accordance with the Kingdom of Dawn, including our resources and reinforcements, so if we change our plan now, we'll have to delay our date of the attack."

"Wasn't this plan already in place when Pope O'Brien was in power? Why are we changing it now?" El asked curiously. "Both kingdoms will fall eventually, so why does the order of attacks matter?"

Tayfun was silent. When His Holiness Mayne ordered him to send Pure Witches to the Kingdom of Graycastle to plot the Western Region, he had already predicted this change. "His Holiness wasn't interested in King's City, but in the border area of the Kingdom of Graycastle."

After the two men stopped bickering, Tayfun said quietly, "I've nothing against the order itself, but there's a lot at stake, and I want to see His Holiness Mayne before we carry it out. Can you pass the message for me?"

"No need for such trouble." Isabella smiled. "It just so happens that His Holiness wants to see you too."

Chapter 442: The Approval Of God

As he walked down the stairs to the bottom of the church, Tayfun felt an inexplicable chill.

In the eerily quiet church basement was the core secret of the church—the Hermes' underground castle.

It was the first time for him to come to this place.

"His Holiness Mayne really wanted to meet me here?" According to the convention, only the archbishop who was in line as the Pope was allowed into the Secret Area, but he was too old to be Mayne's successor.

"You've served the church for so many years and have worked together with His Holiness, so he trusts you deeply," Isabella said with a smile. "Also, past rules don't apply to war-times like these, and God's will shouldn't be hidden underground but used to guide the lost believers and lead us to face our final challenge."

"Is this... His Holiness's idea?"

"That's right," she said gently.

When they entered the Secret Area, they were greeted by two Judgement Warriors. "Milord Bishop, His Holiness is currently testing Magic Stones, so if you are carrying a God's Stone of Retaliation, please give it to me for now—it might affect the stones'

magic power."

Tayfun nodded and handed a string of stones to the Judgement Warrior.

"His Holiness is right here, please follow me."

Isabella turned into a long passageway and pushed open the metal door at the end. Following the screech of the hinges, Tayfun saw another masked Pure Witch. She blocked the doorway like a ghost, her white skin peeking through the black silk covering her body, and she wore nothing else besides this chiffon. The most striking thing about the witch was her dull gray eyes that were different from those of ordinary people. They seemed to have whirlpools inside them that sucked him in if he looked for too long.

Tayfun subconsciously lowered his head.

It was only then that he noticed that she was barefoot and her toes were covered with flecks of red.

The archbishop recalled Isabella's sentence that "witches are completely different from regular women."

Damn it; are all these witches demon spirits?

Those delicate feet soon moved out of the way, and Tayfun heard Isabella's voice. "Milord?"

"Ahem." Tayfun broke out of his thoughts and walked into the room.

The room was not big, and even though the rosin torches on the walls were burning brightly, they didn't give off their usual sweet smell.

Four Pure Witches sat around a stone table and were fiddling with a clear stone, while the incumbent Pope, His Holiness Mayne, stood by the table.

Tayfun was about to kneel in respect, when Mayne grasped his arm and stopped him.

"There aren't any outsiders here, so there's no use for all this red tape." He smiled. "We go way back, Milord Tayfun."

In two months, Mayne's forehead had become much more wrinkled, and he had grown a few more strands of silver hair, but his humble tone was still the same.

"You can't do this..." Tayfun's heart suddenly felt warm. "Even if there aren't other believers here, I still have to follow the church's rules."

"And I make the rules." The Pope smiled nonchalantly. "Anyway... are things alright above ground? I originally wanted Isabella to bring me the news, but since you're here, you can report

directly to me."

"Yes, Your Holiness." Tayfun nodded. After he shared the recent state of the church, he mentioned the order that Isabella had brought up earlier. "All of the resources we prepared up until now are specific to the Kingdom of Dawn, so adjusting our target will take a lot of effort. Why do you suddenly want to attack the Kingdom of Graycastle first?"

"That's also why I called you here." Mayne sighed. "The Kingdom of Graycastle is starting to show signs of decline because the Royal Decree on the Selection of Crown Prince and Pill of Madness are achieving their expected results. Meanwhile, the Kingdom of Dawn is in even more chaos, so both of them will eventually fall, and it doesn't really matter whom we attack first."

"I agree, but... Graycastle is still a formidable enemy."

"I have two reasons for changing our plan of attack," said the Pope slowly, clasping his hands behind his back. "The first is basically the reason why you're worried: The Kingdom of Graycastle is vast and rich in resources, which means it's a high-risk, high-return opponent. If we can make it a territory of the church earlier, our benefits will be much greater than if we conquer the Kingdom of Dawn. If I had ten more years, I would definitely act according to Lord O'Brien's plan, but we don't have enough time. The appearance of the Fearful Beast of Hell means that the Bloody Moon may appear even earlier than predicted in the Holy Book. In times like these, a little risk and more sacrifices will be worth it."

Tayfun nodded slightly, thinking, "This is a good reason, but the problem is... it doesn't seem Mayne will do it in this way." He continued, "And the second reason is..."

"Roland Wimbledon of the Western Region," the Pope said decisively.

"You mean... Prince Roland of the Kingdom of Graycastle?" Tayfun was shocked.

"By combining the past year's reports, I've discovered something incredible." Mayne patted the bishop's shoulder. "Both the church and the Kingdom of Graycastle failed in all their attacks against him. The first failure can be traced back to the one when Duke of the Western Region attacked him, and what did Roland have at the time? Nothing but a run-down small town. Outsiders think that he defeated the Duke's knightage by succumbing to the demons, but we all know that besides Extraordinaries, a few witches have nothing against knights equipped with God's Stones of Retaliation."

"Also, the reports have only become more and more confusing, such as the secret letter sent to the Holy City two months ago, which stated that King Timothy once sent 2,000 crazed soldiers to attack the Western Region and was immediately defeated. What does this mean?"

Tayfun couldn't help but gasp. "2,000 crazed soldiers! Even in Hermes, this is a considerable force."

"If these messages are read separately, they might seem normal, but when combined, they're very shocking—Roland Wimbledon has never lost a single battle!" the Pope said quietly. "Also, our reports show that his power is growing at a concerning pace, and he seems to be preparing for expansion. If we delay for another year, the entire Kingdom of Graycastle may fall into his hands, so it'll be even more costly to try to defeat him." He paused and turned to Tayfun. "There are a lot of matters to be dealt with in the Secret Area, and I have no time for the operation and expansion of the upper levels of the church, so I can only entrust them to you."

After the Archbishop left, the appearance of the room suddenly changed.

The torches on the wall, the Pure Witch who was studying the magic stones, and the stone table disappeared. The figure of the Pope also gradually faded, leaving only Isabella, Zero, and the woman in black.

"If you hadn't mentioned it, I wouldn't have known that Prince Roland of Kingdom of Graycastle was so interesting," said Isabella. "Why do I get the feeling that he, rather than the church, is more likely to defeat the demons?"

"What does that mean?" asked the woman in black, frowning. "Do you want to betray the church?"

"Betray? Don't phrase it like that." Isabella shrugged. "Isn't the

purpose of the church to ensure that human beings survive the Battle of Divine Will? If someone else can do this, I don't care who I serve."

"You...!"

"Stop fighting," said Zero. "Isabella isn't wrong. In the so-called Battle of Divine Will, only the final winner can be protected by God." She looked expressionlessly at the two witches. "As for who will receive the approval of God—the Union or a prince of the Kingdom of Graycastle, I think this war will give us the answer."

Chapter 443: The Conspiracy

Somewhere to the north of Longsong Stronghold, the Western Region of Kingdom of Graycastle

Sir Eltek was sitting by the fireplace contemplating.

They had not heard anything from Miso Eltek since he had left the night before. It was morning now, and he had yet to return.

Sir Eltek felt a deep sense of unease.

Recently, Miso had been very close with the majorfamilies in the Western Region. As the prince's agent in Stronghold, the Honeysuckle Familyhad announced His Highness' intention to integrate the Western Region. All territories would adopt one law and the enfeoffment rights of the nobles would be taken back, which meant they could not expand their subordinate nobles or recruit knights to fight for them.

As for lower nobles like the Elteks, they felt little influence and enjoyed many benefits. As the rumor went, anyone who was loyal to His Highness would be rewarded his favor. Right now, the less influential nobles were the safest people because they would determine the success or failure of His Highness' reform plan.

Consequently, the smartest thing to do was wait and see.

However, Miso Eltek hadn't shared that philosophy.

"My lord, the attendants looking for the second master have returned." said the steward, pushing open the door to the knight's study.

"Have they found him?"

"No," the steward shook his head. "They've searched the taverns, casinos, theaters and brothels and still can't find him."

Eltek was increasingly anxious. He had dispatched two companies of scouts to search for Miso. The first one went to the homes of lower nobility nearby. Most of these nobles were vassals in the employ of Duke Ryan and retained a status comparable to the Duke's family. Miso often went to these places for parties or dinners.

The second group went to the entertainment venues, popular spots for young nobles.

Seeing both parties return empty-handed, the knight's sense of dread intensified.

He stepped to the window, looking toward the eastern territory. The territory of the Elk Family lay in that direction. It was the largest earl domain in the Western Region. Since the collapse of Duke Ryan, Petrov from the Honeysuckle Family had completely swung to Prince Roland and the Elk Family had edged ahead to become the leading power against the prince.

Hell, had Miso gone there...

"My lord, the second master has returned!" Suddenly an attendant ran into the study, breathless. "He's changing clothes in the hall, and it seems he is getting ready to go out."

"What!" The knight immediately grasped his crutch and rushed downstairs, disregarding the steward's pleas for restraint.

The moment Eltek stepped into the hall, he felt his anger rise to a new level. He saw Miso replace his thick coat with a thin and soft leather. The shiny armor of a knight was in front of him and two squires were doing their final preparation work.

"Where did you go yesterday?!" The old knight couldn't help shouting. "What are you up to now?"

"Father, our chance is coming," Miso said excitedly, "A chance to be baron. Maybe even viscount!"

Eltek felt his blood pressure increasing. "Who told you this?"

"Jacques Medde, he brought the king's confidential order!"

Eltek took two steps back, his heart sinking. Jacques Medde was the eldest son of the Elk Family. Never mind the involvement with Timothy. Everyone knew that Timothy wanted to eradicate

Roland Wimbledon.

His worst nightmare had occurred and now it was even more serious than he had anticipated.

"What did you hear?"

"Lord Medde summoned the nobility of the Western Region into his castle and opened his Majesty's holograph. It said that if someone conquers Longsong Stronghold, the king will promote his title and expand his domain!" It seemed that Miso was still immersed in the grand scene. "Lady Miller from the Wild Rose Family, Lord Cavan from the Maple Family and Lord Remy Noah from the Wolf Family all pressed their fingerprints and pledged an oath of allegiance, without hesitation. The rest of the nobles and knights are determined to follow the four families and remove the Honeysuckle Family."

It was ridiculous. How could the four families make such a decision based on a piece of paper? The knight lamented inwardly. Had you forgotten how they had treated King Wimbledon III when Duke Ryan was guarding the Western Region? When had they become so loyal?

The only answer was that this was a complete fraud to convince the lower nobles to become pioneers in the movement. The plan would commence in a few months and the four families might agree on the benefits after finding success.

Eltek opened his mouth but didn't share his thoughts. This was

Miso Eltek, not his eldest son Ferlin, and such dissuasion wouldn't convince him.

"Where are you going in this armor?" the old knight asked after short silence.

"To win honor and status." Miso wore a cuirass made of stainless steel. "Morning Light, the top knight in the Western Region, only won honor for himself. While I fight for my whole family. Father, when this is finished, you'll know that I'm as worthy of respect as my brother."

"If Timothy vanquishes Prince Roland, your words may come to pass. However, the army of the new king is still far away while Prince Roland's army is very near," the old knight thought.

"Don't you remember how Duke Ryan collapsed?" Eltek said in a low voice.

"Things are different this time. The king has shipped a number of snow powder weapons, the same ones used by Prince Roland. He'll provide better ones to Medde. Without the possession of superior weapons, can Roland seize Longsong Stronghold again?" Miso clipped his sword to his waist and nodded to his father. "The battle is coming soon. Please wait here for good news."

Looking at his back, Eltek threw his crutch to the ground.

"My lord, why didn't you stop him?" the steward came up to hold

the trembling Knight.

"It would be easy to stop him, but the family would suffer a great calamity," he nodded slowly. A noble attending the 'rebellion' meeting hadn't shown up at the agreed place. What did this mean for the four families? The crime of escape or defection could lead the whole Eltek Family to death.

"Look on the bright side, if the four families win," the steward comforted. "After all, the months of the demons are long and it'll take two or even three months for the snow to melt. When the army of Prince Roland arrives, the king's army may have already besieged the Western Region."

If it were the past, he would view it in the same way. However, after having visited Border Town once, the knight had a totally different view of Prince Roland. Not to mention his eldest son Ferlin Eltek and his family's benefactor Lady Agatha were all living in Border Town.

He turned to his steward and told him in a stern voice, "Go to Border Town immediately and deliver this news to His Highness. If the city gate has closed, go to the docks in the outskirts and find some ferrymen or fishermen. It doesn't matter how you do it, just do it quickly!"

Chapter 444: The Intelligence

Before the housekeeper left the Eltek territory, Roland received a letter from the Second Army of Stronghold delivered by a bird.

An hour later, Petrov's call for help also reached the town's castle.

Since the carrier pigeon could only carry limited information, Roland had to combine the two messages and discovered a piece of astonishing news.

The four families of the Western Region had rebelled!

"Who on earth gave them the confidence to plot treason under my nose?"

Roland immediately summoned Carter and Iron Axe and showed them the notes.

"Your Highness, is this..."

"A message from Stronghold," Roland said angrily. The winter was drawing to an end, and the new year was in three days. Not only were there various matters concerning the city construction, but also the installation of the equipment for the Three Supplies Project required his instruction. "Those nobles chose to trouble me at the wrong time; they must be looking forward to dying!"

According to the secret letter, the inner city nobles led a bunch of squires to attack the city guards. By the time the sentries on the city wall realized something was wrong, the switch for the northern drawbridge had fallen into the control of the enemies. The sentries could do nothing but light the beacon fire and rely on the city wall to hold their positions.

When the other members of the Second Army saw the beacon signal, they followed the emergency response protocol by dividing the camp's ten teams of about 50 soldiers in total into two platoons. One platoon charged toward the north gate, while the other went to the Stronghold castle. Petrov's secret letter was sent after the second platoon confronted the enemies at the castle and realized they were fighting the local nobilities.

"Petrov Hull mentioned that the attackers sieging the castle were carrying the four families' banners, which means this rebellion was planned," Carter frowned after reading the notes. "Since the four families are acting together, there must be a leader among them."

Indeed, the four families, or five families including those under Duke Ryan, were great nobles on equal footing. If they were to set aside their prejudices and cooperate, it was most likely because a bigger force was behind them. Otherwise, with the Earls looking down upon each other, it would take over a decade for them to decide on a leader.

At the moment, there were only one or two people who would be interested in meddling with the Western Region.

"Do you mean... Timothy in the King's City?" Iron Axe looked at the Chief Knight. As a member of the Ironsand people of the Mojin Clan, he was far less sensitive to the political situation of the Kingdom of Graycastle than Carter was.

"I wouldn't be surprised if it's the church," Roland twitched his mouth and said. "Judging from their actions at Fallen Dragon Ridge, it's only a matter of time before they attack the Western Region."

"The problem is, in the second letter, Petrov mentioned the enemies might have firearms." Carter frowned. "Does it mean they have learned the formula for gunpowder?"

"Snow powder isn't unknown to the church and Timothy, but they have a long way to go before they can use it smoothly." The prince knocked on the table lightly. "What puzzles me is that with Border Town as the nearest town to Stronghold, the help they get must be from somewhere further. So even with the support of an unknown force, how did they gain enough confidence to confront the First Army?"

"Probably because we're in the Months of the Demons," Iron Axe replied after contemplating for a while. "Although last time Your Highness defeated the Duke's knights using thunder power, our troops didn't show extraordinary skills in battle. Now with the snow blocking the roads and demonic beasts attacking the borders, it seems like perfect timing for a successful rebellion, and it'll be at least two months before you have the resources to attack Longsong Stronghold."

"And I'll be hindered by the lofty city walls and powerful flintlocks?"

"Yes," Iron Axe couldn't help but grin. "They have all the weapons that you have, plus the insurmountable city wall and reinforcement of an unknown force, so they have a very good chance of beating you at the foot of the city wall. That's probably what they thought."

"Yet they're fully unaware of the power of Border Town." Roland stood up. "Iron Axe!"

"At your command, Your Highness!" Iron Axe instantly stood at attention.

"The First Army must immediately prepare for an expedition. We'll set off tomorrow morning," Roland said decisively. "Choose 500 soldiers. Carry six field artilleries. You are in charge of making the specific arrangements."

"Yes, Sir!" Iron Axe saluted.

The scale of the First Army had quadrupled its original 500 soldiers to 2,200. Revolving rifles were upgraded, and their firepower was drastically increased. Besides, the efficiency of the First Army's executing instructions was greatly enhanced due to the improvement of the soldiers' educational level. Upon command, personnel would deploy ammunition and rations based on the number of soldiers on the operation and the number of days. The logistics work for 500 people could be done in almost one

day. Compared with the knights or the mercenaries, who needed weeks to prepare, Roland's army was functioning at an incredible speed.

The army headed towards the inner city of Stronghold on 11 paddle steamers. After entering mass production, the production of a boat with a reinforced concrete hull took only five days, which was even a deliberately lowered speed, because its number was limited by the available crew and steam engines.

"Carter!"

"At your command, Your Highness," the Chief Knight said and raised his head high.

"You stay in Border Town."

The corners of the knight's mouth instantly fell down. "What? No. Your Highness. How could you leave me behind again?"

"We're still in the Months of the Demons. Demonic beasts pose a greater threat than the nobility," Roland said unwaveringly. "Guard the town well."

After the two of them retreated, Roland sighed. "This time the witches need to go with me."

"I'll follow you, no matter where you go," Nightingale said with a smile.

Considering their opponent could be the church, Roland knew that only the witches could effectively counter the Pure Witches' attacks without God's Stones of Retaliation. After debating his options, Roland decided on the witches who would accompany him: Lightning, Maggie, Sylvie, Nana, Lily, and Nightingale. "If I add the three combat witches from Sleeping Island to the list, it'll be very hard for the Pure Witches to defeat us."

Roland stood at the window and looked at the snowy mountains and plains.

"If I view the Impassable Mountain Range as the city wall of Stronghold, then the Barbarian Land in the north is also the domain of the four families, a territory beyond the reach of my power. Elk, Wild Rose, Maple Leaf, and Wolf families... have operated separately on their own lands for over a decade, forming their unique laws and customs, so even Ryan, the overlord of the Western Region, seldom interfered with their businesses," mused Roland. The prince had intended to slowly divide and annex these aristocratic territories after building the new city, but the rebellion gave him an early opportunity—one to swallow the vast land and population of Stronghold in one gulp.

He didn't intend to let go of the nobles this time.

Chapter 445: Attacks

Cacusim arrived at the dock as the first rays of sunlight started to peep through the clouds.

Unlike the usual, the dock was packed with silent soldiers. They stood erect, with their sacks and long-barrelled guns on their backs, looking like a thick forest in a storm. Although the dock was crowded, everyone was moving in an organized manner. Watching the soldiers board the paddle steamer one by one, Cacusim was filled with an indescribable sense of power and strength.

He swallowed hard while thinking,

These are the soldiers trained by His Highness.

"How incredible!" The old man had traveled from Seawindshire to the Port of Clearwater as a youth. This distance was over half the Kingdom of Graycastle, and he had also led the commercial fleet to the Fjords and nearby islands. So, he had personally witnessed the arrogant demeanor of the armored knights, as well as the fierce demeanor of the barbarians who killed beasts bare-handed. To him, these soldiers were undeniable fighters that could exercise extreme power. However, he had not expected to feel that power once again, but while standing with the group of ordinary people he could feel it and it was stronger than ever.

"No doubt these are just ordinary people..." He thought. It had been about four months since Cacusim arrived at Border Town, and each day he understood the town a little better. He knew that

the First Army consisted mostly of locals and that many of them were miners, hunters, furnace labors, and masons before they joined the army. Because of this, they had never received any professional combat training.

Nevertheless, in just a few months, these people had become as brave and disciplined as any knight. "What magic did his Highness use on them?"

"Are you... really going?" Cacusim heard Wade whisper from behind him. He could tell from his lowered voice, that he too was silenced by the presence of the army.

"Why did I apply for the captain position if I wasn't going?" Cacusim answered while taking a deep breath.

"But they are off to fight." Wade continued.

"They all offer their services to His Highness." The old man corrected. Without turning his head he added, "And so do I."

Following the momentary silence, Wade then implored, "Stay alive."

Cacusim waved in response.

...

Cacusim boarded the sixth paddle steamer as it arrived with the swirling snow. According to the tradition, a captain can name their own ship, and even though this boat belonged to His Highness, he was still allowed to decide its name.

Yet, he still had not made up his mind.

This was the second time he had assumed the position of captain since his retirement ten years ago. So, he wished to come up with a name dedicated to his memory.

"Captain, there you are!" As soon as Cacusim stepped into the cabin at the helm, the first mate came up to greet him. "We are now preheating the boiler, and I promise it will soon be ready to go"

The young man was called Pike and he was from the Southern Territory. He had a few years experience fishing on the sea. If he was a part of another fleet, he wouldn't even pass as a sailor but on this boat, everyone was a newbie.

"Everyone's here?"

"All are on board. You were the last one," Pike replied with a wink.

"If you don't know how to respect your captain, I'll be happy to teach you through a full day of deck cleaning."

"Yes, captain." The young man shouted, erecting himself immediately, "Of course I do!"

"That's better," Cacusim commented. While stroking his beard he gave Pike orders. "Tell the boiler house to stoke up the fire, but not to shut the damn steam valve. I don't want to rear-end the boat in front of us!"

"Yes, gotcha." Without finishing the sentence, Pike had slipped back into his previous playful manner. He quickly winked at the old man and dashed out of the cabin.

"That rascal," Cacusim mumbled while shaking his head smiling. He was more at ease after the interaction, as if he had slipped back to the good days of when he roamed the sea. The old man went back to the wheel, where he gently stroked its wooden handle. Slowly he began to remember the operating procedures for a paddle steamer.

The stone boat invented by His Highness was very different from the sailboat. It didn't have a mast or a cabin below deck, instead, it had two chambers. The first chamber is located at the helm and is called the wheelhouse. This room has two large windows from which the captain can see the route and navigate clearly. The second chamber is found in the middle and it contains the boiler that powers the boat.

Behind the wheelhouse, there was a bare deck and this space was often filled by miners during training. During this time of training, they would often travel west along the Redwater River to drop the miners off at the edge of the Misty Forest, where they could find

coal. Coal lasted longer than wood and was the preferred fuel for Seawindshire. Now, there was a makeshift shed constructed from cloth, apparently set up in preparation for the boarded soldiers.

Although Cacusim was not familiar with the stone boat, he soon realized it was not hard to operate and even simpler than a sailboat in many ways. First of all, this boat didn't require wind and sails for direction and power. Overall it took less man power to run. Furthermore, It would not be hard to teach a villager how to run a stove, whereas it would take at least six months for them to master sailing. The stone boat could run by itself for a long time as long as the engine was on and the steam valve was shut.

Just then, the tranquility of Border Town's early morning was broken by a dull steam whistle from the front of the line.

The first boat was sailing off.

"Captain, the water in the boiler is ready!" reported Pike who scurried back to the wheel house.

"Ring the bell to tell Bigpad and Grizzly that it is time to shut the valve and speed up. It's time to move." Cacusim solemnly gave the instructions.

"Yes, sir. Advance!" Pike pulled on the long iron string attached to the wall, which would ring the bell in the boiler house and deliver the captain's command.

In response, the boat shook violently, and the wooden tires on either side started to move slowly.

Cacusim held tight to the wheel at the helm and looked straight ahead. When Vader asked him why he wanted to fight, he actually did not tell him the truth. Saying it was to serve His Highness was only a small part of the reason.

The truth was he simply enjoyed being a "captain".

It didn't matter if it was a sailboat or a paddle steamer, Cacusim truly loved the feel of the wheel in his hands as he navigated the bow through the thrusting waves.

This is the life he really wants.

"Full sail... No, continue to shovel coal!" The old man turned to face starboard while hollering. "Hold on guys! We're setting out!"

"If you ferry me to Border Town the Eltkes will pay you well. How about five... no, ten gold royals?" The steward asked while blocking the troubled boatman's cabin door. The steward had placed his left foot in the crack of the door to prevent the boatman from closing it in his face and effectively shutting him out.

"Y... Your Excellency, I'm happy to be at your service, but I just can't." The boatman stammered, "L... Look, there isn't even a shed

above my boat to protect you from the snow. It wouldn't be a problem to ferry you across the river, but to Border Town... that would take several days! "Just consider this freezing weather. Where would we sleep?" the boatman implored. "We would become frozen like popsicles in just one night on the boat, wouldn't we?"

"Are there any other boatmen nearby who can ferry me to Border Town?" the steward persisted.

"No, not a one." the boatman denied while waving his hand. "We only have small boats. Y... You should go to Stronghold to find a boat you can spend the night on."

If I could have entered Longsong Stronghold, why did I come here looking for a boatman that fished and ferried for a living? the steward thought to himself as the boatman shut the door.

The steward kicked at the snow. Ever since the four families started to attack Stronghold, all the city gates had been closed. He spent a long time taking this detour and now found that all of his efforts were in vain.

It will be getting dark soon. How am I going to complete my Lord's task?

The steward sullenly looked at the Redwater River, but he was soon stunned.

Good Heavens, what's that?

He rubbed his eyes in disbelief, making sure what he was seeing was not an illusion. A huge fleet was coming down the river and the boats were unlike any he had seen before. Through the dense misty snow, the vessels roared and whistled towards him at full speed. There was not any sail on the gray boats and yet they were still proceeding against the wind, their bows cutting the water and cleaving through the waves.

On the first boat, he could see a flag flapping in the wind with the embroidered emblem of a tower and a gun. The steward held his breath in realization, "This is the fleet of Prince Roland Wimbledon!"

Chapter 446: Here Comes The Giant Beast

Longsong Stronghold was bisected by a branch of the Redwater River; to the West laid the residential area and to the East laid vast farming lands.

Unlike the other big cities that were set in the suburbs of farmlands, the towering city wall of the Stronghold encircled both the residential area and a portion of the farmlands. It was built to defend against human beings, and not demonic beasts. However, even if the city was under siege, Stronghold would still flourish and be able to supply its people.

As such, the outer wall of Longsong Stronghold was split where the river divided the two sections of the city. Between the divide in the walls hung several massive chains which were the width of a man's arm. If an enemy decided to attack from the river, the hemp cords holding the heavy chains would be cut and send them crashing into the water to stop the enemy below.

Fortunately, the inner land of the Western Region had rarely been attacked by any fleets. So, these cables had almost never come into use, and would not this time either. Out on the water, Roland's fleet pushed through the storm. Around twilight, they were able to see the silhouette of the fortress in the distance. Strands of the beacon's fire could be seen flashing above the city, slashing through the inkiness of the ever gradually darkening sky.

"The enemies have already reached the lord's castle and there are some militias fighting with the guards at the north gate of the city wall. It looks like they can't hold up any longer." Lightning, who

had carefully investigated the situation in the city, continued giving her detailed report to the prince, "There are around 200 people attacking the castle. The first round of attacks failed. The enemies have weapons similar to our flintlocks, but they look completely different."

"Is Petrov alright?" Roland inquired, showing concern. Roland currently cared most about the safety of his agent.

"He's fine, other than being a little frightened. But..."

"But what?"

"His family was killed," Lightning answered, her mouth twitching. "His Excellency Petrov warned his father and asked him to get to the castle. However, his other family members were taken as hostages, including the Countess. They were being held by the four families in exchange for surrender and subsequently they were executed one by one." The little girl paused for a moment before continuing, "I took an opportunity to fly into the castle to tell him that you would be coming soon and he had only one request."

Roland nodded and asked, "What is it?"

"Blood for blood."

There was an unwritten rule among nobles where people with bestowed titles were exempt from being murdered in times of

battle. In the case of the family of Earl Honeysuckle, most of his loved ones had been honored with a knighthood. However, the four families had betrayed that rule. Not only did they hate the Honeysuckle Family because of the benefits of Roland's support but they were also being driven by a new political power.

In light of this, Roland was almost certain the power behind them was the new king, Timothy Wimbledon. He now realized there was no room for mercy and that he needed to crush them. Supporting the king and executing rebels was very different from helping the church slaughter nobles. The prince looked towards Stronghold and coldly gave the order, "Go straight into the city and take the dock!"

Ayt heard the sound of footsteps below the city wall.

He raised the flintlock numbly, aiming it at the dark hole below. This was the only path to climb up the city wall from within. There had been several rounds of attacks since the enemies captured the city gate, but they were still not able to seize the northern part of the city wall.

The battle started yesterday at noon and had yet to cease. He hadn't expected to be standing in the cold, brisk wind for so long. After watching his supporting comrades fall one by one into pools of blood, all he could focus on was fighting.

"Are they coming again?" Seeing a long-barrelled gun pop up next

to him, Ayt tilted his head to the side and found that it was his unit leader, Bronzehill.

"I could hear them," Ayt replied feebly, "but I have no idea how many there are in the darkness."

"They don't know how many of us are left either," Bronzehill comforted him.

"So... how many are left?"

Bronzehill answered after a moment's hesitation, "Only five. Raven just took his last breath."

"And we probably won't see the sun tomorrow," Ayt said bitterly. After the initial feelings of fear and panic, he then became numb. It was this experience that helped him finally understand what his instructor had meant when he said, "Only a real battle will quickly make you a man." However, this did not make the current situation any better. Out of the three units, there were only five people left. Even if the enemies didn't make it up the wall, they would likely die from starvation or exposure to cold. "Can we still surrender?"

"Surrender?" Bronzehill snorted. "Didn't you hear what they were yelling? 'Kill the rebels!' There's nothing but death ahead. We'd better take down as many as possible while we can."

Ayt knew the unit leader was right. Many captured soldiers from

the Second Army were beheaded. They were not nobles, and nobody would pay a ransom. But... he just hated the idea of dying up here.

The instructor had told them about how happy life in Border Town was and promised that once the Months of the Demons had passed, soldiers who did well in the Second Army would be transferred to the First Army and receive free housing there. There was plenty of food in Border Town, as well as running water and a heating system that could warm up a whole room without ignition...

He wanted to survive and see the amazing things that his instructor had described.

"Here they come!" Bronzehill suddenly shouted while pulling the trigger. In the muzzle flash, Ayt could see the figure of the enemy revealed in the darkness. Six or seven people were creeping slowly up along the wall, holding up their shields. He even caught a glimpse of the terror in their eyes.

The unit leader missed his target, fortunately, he was already pointing the gun in the right direction.

He aimed at the fleeting figure and fired again.

There was the muffled sound of a bullet hitting a wooden shield, and then a shriek, followed by the sound of a heavy object rolling down the stairs. Realizing that they had been exposed, the rest of the enemies rushed to the opening recklessly.

Bronzehill was struggling to reload his gun, but his frozen hands hindered the process, slowing him greatly. Ayt jumped back from the open pit and groped frantically for his gunpowder sack. His heart sank when he found it empty and he realized that he had already used it all.

According to his training, now was the time to use the bayonets.

He pulled out the bayonet and struggled to attach the knife to the front of his gun. Clenching his teeth in frustration, he finally got it to attach and lifted it just in time as the enemy breached the hole and rushed at him.

Instantly firing, Bronzehill took the first man down, but there was a second close on his heels and this one managed to slide a sword into Bronzehill's chest.

Ayt was stunned and his training took over. He mechanically thrust his bayonet in futility, only striking the enemy's shield. The enemy easily kicked him to the ground, disarming him completely.

Am I really going to die here?

Looking up at the night sky in despair, he noticed a dark figure above him.

He normally wouldn't notice something so dark against the inky sky that night, but the shadow was close and rapidly getting closer

still. It plummeted towards him like a collapsed curtain made of night.

Ayt's eyes bulged as the shadow became more defined and he realized it was a giant beast!

This was a beast only found in nightmares. Its huge crimson mouth was gaping, head larger than a bull's, and giant wings that almost covered the entire length of the city wall.

The giant beast descended right in front of Ayt, crushing the enemies who just surfaced from the opening.

"Ow... Ow...!"

It released a thunderous growl that was loud enough to wake the dead!

Chapter 447: The Reaper

Ayt was paralyzed with fright. He helplessly stared at the beast, who now also turned to look at him. He could clearly see mucus dripping from its beige fangs.

"Relax. I'm not going to eat you." The beast suddenly spoke in human language with a muddy voice, which almost horrified him enough to shriek.

He was astounded again when seeing a girl jump off the beast's back. She walked towards Bronzehill, turned him over and checked him out. She said to the beast, "He's alive. Maggie, send him to Nana."

"Ow!" The beast seemed to understand what she said. It grabbed Bronzehill with its claws and flew up again. The flapping of its wings stirred up the air, producing strong winds, which made Ayt unable to open his eyes. When the wind and snow finally stopped, he squinted at the city wall but saw nothing at all—as if everything that had happened was just a dream.

"No, it's not a dream... That girl is still here!" he thought.

He vaguely saw the girl's figure in the darkness. There was apparently no light around, but her pupils were emitting weird golden lights, like stars in the night.

"You... you're..."

"I came to help you." The girl's reply left him dumbfounded.

"Wh-what?" Ayt felt this was more implausible than a dream.
"You're here to help me?"

"Yes. His Highness Roland sent me here." She squatted down, dug out a long sword from the flattened corpses and swung it, completely disregarding the fact that the sword was covered with flesh and blood.

Ayt was overcome by a feeling of sickness. He retched twice but vomited nothing except bile. Just then, outside the city wall, a battle cry resounded again. The beast had just terrified the enemies—but now that they saw it had left, and they had no idea what had happened up there on top of the city wall, they began to stir again.

"By 'His Highness'... you mean the prince of Border Town?" He wiped his mouth and gasped.

"Is there another Roland besides him?" the black-haired girl asked, as she started to dig another weapon from a corpse. Ayt immediately turned his head away from her.

"But it takes at least three days to get here from Border Town... How did His Highness know about the noble's rebellion so quickly?" Ayt swallowed hard and continued, "and the beast just now..."

"It's not a beast, but a witch that came here to save you." Her voice turned cold. "I don't have time to answer all your questions. Just keep quiet."

As there was no flintlock blocking them this time, the enemies easily came up on top of the city wall. When torches lit the place up again, they were surprised to find only a girl standing in front of them.

Malicious laughter soon broke the silence.

Ayt immediately knew what they meant by the laughter.

"Stay alert. Don't give them any chance to play any dirty tricks on us."

"Don't worry, my lord. We'll take care of it, but later..."

"When I'm done, I'll leave her to you."

"Hey... fine with me."

"Qui-quickly come back here to me!" Ayt struggled to stand up, but what happened next made him stare in amazement.

A silver light chopped down and the laughter died abruptly.

The leader of the enemies was chopped into two pieces by the long sword. His shield and armor could not stop it at all. In fact, he didn't even see the girl strike.

When the two pieces of his body fell down with blood spurting out from the wounds, everyone's smile froze on their face.

However, this was just the beginning.

The black-haired girl took one step forward and swept her sword. Before Ayt could clearly see her movements, he heard the sound of flesh scraping and bones breakings.

The three men had no time to react as they were ripped open in their stomachs.

Their intestines fell out mixed with blood and spilled all over the ground.

"You..." Ayt opened his mouth a little but didn't know what to say.

The girl looked back at him and said, "Go find your surviving battle companions and gather on top of the wall. Someone will come to fetch you later." With these words, she jumped directly off the city wall.

"The city wall here was thirty feet tall!" He endured all the pains in his body, fumbled to climb close to the edge of the wall and

looked down. He saw the crowd down there turning into a meat grinder. The girl killed wherever she went. She freely dashed among the crowd, with her weapon moving around smoothly in her hand. She easily cut down the entire enemy who dared to stand in front of her, like the reaping of wheat.

In less than a quarter of an hour, the enemy collapsed.

They'd never seen such a fierce opponent, who was faster than a snow wolf and stronger than a grizzly bear. Facing her sword, nobody could react, dodge, or fight. The noblemen hurriedly retreated and the siege was extinguished, merely by one person.

She followed the escaping crowd all the way, leaving a trail of blood behind her. At this sight, Ayt dropped to the ground and cold sweat soaked his spine.

That's a witch?

Well. whatever... I survived!

The Stronghold castle was tightly besieged by the four families' armies. A dozen bonfires around the castle brightly lit the place up.

After a day and night of fighting, the second floor of the castle had already been conquered. The Honeysuckles now shrunk back to the very top of it and must be suffering from both hunger and

fear up there.

Jacques Medde looked at this towering lord's castle and began to feel excited.

After his father died, he traveled all the way back to the territory from the King's City just to inherit the Earl's title, but now he had an even better chance.

Timothy mentioned in the secret letter that if he could take hold of Longsong Stronghold for the King's City, the king's army would come here when the snow melted to conquer the rebel king, Roland Wimbledon. Once the rebel king was eliminated, Timothy would probably let him govern the Western Region.

Together with the territory of Earl Honeysuckle, Jacques would have both the land and title of a duke.

Duke Medde. What a wonderful name!

This castle would also become my residence.

"My lord, the sixth platoon has come back down," a knight came and reported, "and they said they heard a lot less flintlock sounds from the enemy. Is it time to send iron armor platoons up there?"

Jacques Medde nodded and said, "Go and arrange it."

Iron armor platoons were specially developed to fight against flintlocks. During the fighting, three or four soldiers formed a team—two of them held shields made of wood with several layers of iron coating, which could cover them all up, and had holes for aiming and firing. In order to make more shields like this, he made the tough decision to tear down a dozen knight's armors. Of course, those thick iron-coated shields had a weakness, too. As it was hard to carry and the whole team had to move slowly, they would easily become targets for their enemies.

"Luckily, the Honeysuckles can't hold out any longer." Jacques sneered silently. "They reacted unexpectedly quickly and withdrew part of their soldiers and knights back into the castle before the four families' armies arrived, and they had just only nearly a hundred men. It's impossible for them to fight a long, hard battle.

It'll probably take several days before Prince Roland receives the news.

If I send Petrov's head as a gift to Roland Wimbledon, how will he look like?

Chapter 448: A Hail Of Bullets

"My lord, the dock area in the west city seems strange," reported a guard who was in charge of sealing off the street. "I've heard strange noises coming from there and sent two platoons to investigate but none of them came back."

"What?" Jacques Medde said with a frown, "You must have misheard it."

"No, it's clear, like the sounds of heavy, rapid breathing. Wheeze, wheeze..." the guard said, imitating the sounds.

"Maybe it's the snoring sounds of a tramp?"

"My lord, in this weather, anyone sleeping outside will be frozen to death," the guard insisted, "and nobody can snore that loudly. It must be a giant almost as tall as the city wall if they're really snoring sounds."

The Earl stared at him for a good long while and then turned away, shouting, "Knight Dowcan!"

"My lord, what can I do for you?" a knight wearing the badge of the Maple Family on his chest responded, striding toward the Earl.

"Summon your platoon and follow my guard to investigate the dock in the city." Jacques patted the knight's shoulder and added, "Inform me at once if you've any news."

"Eh... Could you send someone else there?" the young knight said, hesitating. "My father urged me to enter the castle together with you."

"It won't take you long to go to the dock, but I can assure you here it'll take a lot longer," the Earl said with a smile, "and if the Honeysuckle Family surrenders, I'll wait for you here."

"Ah... fine."

After the knight left with his guard, Jacques' facial expression turned stone-cold. "Keep dreaming! You think you can receive the same credit by sending a son here to enter the castle with me? His Majesty mentioned only me in the secret letter!"

Before long, he heard the distant sound of gunfire coming from the west.

Jacques was instantly on the alert. "What's that? The eldest son of the Maple Family has no flintlock."

When he was planning to send some of his knights there to check the situation, the guard who had reported to him earlier stumbled back into the battalion. "My, my lord... things have gone wrong!"

"What went wrong?"

"The rebel king... he came here!" The guard said with his eyes widely opened, "Thousands of enemies are heading for the castle!"

"You meant Roland Wimbledon's army?" Jacques raised his hand and slapped the guard on the face. "Thousands of them? If you dare to talk nonsense, I'll hang you up on the city gate!"

"My lord, they carry the flags of the Kingdom of Graycastle." The guard did not dare to dodge. He got down on one knee and continued, "I wanted the squire of Knight Dowcan to catch one or two enemies to get further information, but the moment they charged towards them, they were, were..."

"What happened to them?" the Earl pressed.

"They were shot down by intense gunfire." The Earl could tell from the guard's face that he seemed to have witnessed very terrifying scenes. "At that time, it looked like numerous fires popped out all of a sudden in the darkness and the cracking sounds never stopped. Twenty people only charged forward for less than 100 steps before they were all shot down and so did the horses!" The guard swallowed and went on, "My lord, I've never seen such an intense gunfire. If there weren't more than a thousand enemies, how could they eliminate the knight's platoon in just a blink?"

"Where is the eldest son of the Maple Family?"

"He's... run away."

The Earl sank, weak-kneed, into his chair and was completely confused. "How is it possible? The four families started to act from yesterday at noon and Prince Roland came to support Longsong Stronghold tonight. If we count the messaging time, does this mean he needs only one day to come here from his town? Even when sailing smoothly with the wind the entire time, they can't reach here that fast, let alone while carrying a thousand people. To transport that many people, he needs at least a huge fleet, but according to the intelligence, Border Town has no ship in the winter!"

How could things turn out like this?

"No, I have to be calm in such an emergency." Jacques Medde wiped the sweat from his forehead and thought that maybe the guard did talk nonsense. Without torches, he could not see clearly how many enemies were there on the dock in the darkness when he was obviously shocked by their firing flintlocks. "Flintlocks may seem powerful. However, their shooting range was merely about 40 steps and their reloading speed and hit rate were extremely low. Assuming that every enemy is equipped with this kind of weapon, they won't be unbeatable for at most two dozen soldiers who can march abreast in the street leading to the castle. If I inform the Wild Rose and the Wolf Family now and gather all the knights, mercenary fighters and guards to attack them after their first round of firing, maybe we could defeat them.

Unlike battles in fields, the poor efficiency in flintlock reloading is a fatal shortcoming in street fights.

"Damn it." Jacques slapped on an arm of his chair and said to the

head of his guards. "Go to invite Earl Wild Rose and the Viscount of the Wolf Family to come here and order all the men with flintlocks to block the entrance of the castle. Go!"

Compared with crossbowmen, it's much faster to train flintlock soldiers. Let them block the enemies first. Their lives aren't worth much. If necessary, knights can tread on them.

To his great surprise, the head of his guards came back and reported, "They've already left the battalion with their men."

To besiege Petrov, the four families respectively held the four sides of the castle. Jacques did not expect that the other families received the news earlier than him.

Now, the sounds of gunfire were nearing the castle. As the guard had described, they were the deep rumble of dense drums, loud and clear across the growing mounds of snow.

"These bastards!" Jacques' heart froze. He looked at the castle for the last time. He had no choice but to order a retreat. This time, only he and his guards had the chance to flee. His men in the castle were left behind.

Outside the castle, the Earl was shocked by the scene.

The enemies were everywhere, and any knight who tried to break through the blockade would be shot down remorselessly. Their weapons were nothing like the flintlocks sent by Timothy.

They could fire continuously and seemed to require no reloading. It was chaotic. Members of the other three families were trapped, with the exception of Knight Dowcan, who had been the first to flee.

"My lord, what should we do?"

"Send for the iron armor platoons!" he cried out. "We'll forge behind them and we'll be covered by their iron shields."

After all the troubles, three iron armor platoons finally gathered and slowly moved forward holding their shields. The other knights found it and followed them, too. They knew that this might be their last chance to break through.

Unfortunately, Jacques Medde made a mistake. When they were only 100 steps from their enemies, the latter's weapons exploded with dazzling bursts of fire. The iron shields made to block lead balls were instantly riddled with bullets. The men in the front holding the shields were killed. Splashing metal debris shot through bodies, stirring up a thick fog of blood behind the shields.

Before the Earl could call out the order of charge, he was cut down in a volley of fire.

Chapter 449: The Course Of War

...

When Roland walked into the messy castle, Petrov and Earl Hull were kneeling down on one knee in the center of the hall, awaiting his arrival.

All the bodies on the floor had been removed, but the smell of the blood lingered. The pieces of broken furnishings and weapons could be seen everywhere; he could almost imagine the killing-scenes between the two parties in the battle for the castle.

"Rise." Roland walked towards Petrov, bending over to hold his shoulders.

"Yes," Petrov said in a choked voice, "Your Highness, you are finally here."

"You did a good job," Roland said with a heavy voice, "the four big families will pay a heavy price for this, and the murderers shall be brought to justice."

"I didn't guard Longsong Stronghold well..."

"You did your best. It's not your fault." Roland sighed. Petrov was not a ruler of war. This was evident from the seizure of the previous city by the light cavalry and the rebellion of the nobilities this time. He was good at managing the territory, proficient in

trading, and skilled in capturing opportunities, but he was not a Machiavellian. He was definitely not an expert at fighting and plotting. If it wasn't for the Second Army that was stationed in the castle in accordance with the emergency measure, he wouldn't have been able to hold more than two days.

However, that did not mean Petrov Hull was not a good manager. If he was not good at war, he should be assigned to a territory without any war. Roland preferred operators with a business mind to those with fighting talents.

"I believe there must have been an inducement for this riot," Roland looked at everyone around him. "This is a downright conspiracy. The enemy seeks to subvert the order of Western Region in order to obtain benefits that don't belong to them."

The scene quieted down. Everyone, including both the armed soldiers of the First Army and the wounded knights behind Petrov, had their gazes on His Highness.

"They have committed a felony for this, murdering the nobility and killing the civilians. After the war, we'll see that many people have lost their families, and many houses will have been looted. But their conspiracy didn't succeed in the end. It was your unyielding resistance that prevented Stronghold from falling into a greater tragedy. Your performance was heroic and your willpower was laudable!"

The knights slightly lifted their chests without realizing it.

"However, the war isn't over yet. These rebels are fleeing in panic, and it's time for us to seek our revenge! I swear no matter where the enemies are hiding, they won't escape the coming trial, be it in the territories of the four families... or King's City!" Roland paused and said categorically, "The culprits who caused the rebellion are bound to be punished too! The blood you shed... will not be in vain!"

"Long live, Your Highness!" Petrov and Earl Hull knelt down once again.

"Long live, Your Highness!" The surviving knights and soldiers of the Second Army also began to kneel.

Soon, everyone was kneeling on one knee with their upper body upright, right hand on the chest, shouting the slogan in unison.

"Long live, Your Highness!"

...

After comforting the people at the scene, Roland summoned Petrov, Van'er, Brian, and Iron Axe into the study on the third floor of the castle, which was the only place that had not been invaded. All the furnishings were basically intact. Roland knew that he would probably have to spend the next few days there.

The first thing he had to do was to understand the situation regarding the battlefield within the city. He looked at Iron Axe,

and the latter reported immediately, "The witches have seized back the northern gate and the eastern gate which was once occupied by the four families. The First Army is eliminating the rebels within the city under Miss Sylvie's guidance. The order of the city should be restored by tomorrow morning."

"What about the casualties?"

"A total of six people were injured so far, and all of them are from the rifle battalion, but they've been treated and cured by Miss Nana."

"What about the Second Army? Has it been counted?"

"Not yet... But according to the latest news, there are more casualties." Brian hesitated. "Both of the platoons sent to support the city wall have been defeated, and they haven't been gathered so far. Out of the 50 soldiers who were sent to defend the castle, 11 were killed, and almost none of the soldiers patrolling on the city wall survived."

Roland nodded. The militancy of this era was not as high, enabling the 100 people to persist for two days. The defensive party tended to have the bigger advantages, especially when the enemy lacked effective assault weapons. If the other party wasn't using firearms, the Lord's castle could not be broken through with only the flesh and blood of the mercenary and guards. This was fully taken into account during the design of this building to prevent enemy attack.

At this thought, he instructed Iron Axe, "Show me some of the rebels' firearms."

Roland was really concerned about the new hot weapons of this era. Although this day was expected to come sooner or later since the birth of the snow powder, the development speed of Timothy really surprised him.

Iron Axe carried out the order quickly. Only several minutes later, a few tube-like weapons of different lengths and shapes were carried into the study by soldiers.

After seeing the actual objects, Roland quickly understood why the enemies could build the weapons in a fairly short time.

These long tubes could not be called flintlock in the sense that they had no trigger and percussion device, and they were nothing more than metal tubes with a hole at each end. It was deeper at one end for loading gunpowder and bullets and had a needle-like hole at the end for ignition. The other end was shallower and could be used as the handle after inserting a bamboo stick or a wooden pole.

It was very similar to the prototype of the flintlock, structure-wise.

The loading process of this primitive fire lance was the same as that of the flintlock, but the launch was more troublesome. It required a gunman to hold the wooden pole under his armpit and ignite the gunpowder with the hand on the other side. Due to the limitation caused by the holding position, it was impossible to aim

accurately and could only be roughly pointed straight ahead while shooting.

But it was still undoubtedly a hot weapon. Putting aside all the inconveniences, its launch principle was completely consistent with the flintlock. Its barrel and projectile were almost the same as those of the latter's, so the power was far greater than crossbow bolts. If shot, the armor of knights would not hold the attack.

Timothy's efforts on the customization could obviously be seen from the unique look of each fire lance. Some were made of rolled-steel with clear thumping traces left on the body of the pipe, while some were molded by wrought copper and looked smooth. Considering they were simply testing products to assist the four families, the firearms used by Timothy himself should be better.

However... even the best fire lance was merely a fire lance.

The King's City had no chance of winning as soon as the launch of the spring attack began. They would be unable to face the Western Region army armed with revolving rifles, bolt rifles, and HMGs (heavy machine gun).

Roland shifted his gaze back to the four of them and said, "The First Army will be recovering the suburban territories of Longsong Stronghold one by one from tomorrow onwards. Any nobility who resists can be put to death on the spot. I hope the entire Western Region will be unified after this week."

"Yes, Your Highness!" The four of them answered in unison.

Chapter 450: Old Friends

...

Rene Medde had been trapped in the basement of the Elk's mansion for half a month.

He thought he could've stopped Jacques, but he hadn't expected his elder brother to make the first move.

"Here is your lunch. Hope you enjoy it." Sean, the long-faced steward, brought a plate of sticky food to the cell. What was on the plate looked like a mixture of oatmeal and vegetables, and the portion was only palm-sized.

"Set me free, you dumbass!" Rene threw the food on the floor. Holding the cell bars, he shouted, "Jacques is a dumbass too. He has no idea what he's doing. It's not too late to let me out!"

The steward shook his head regretfully, took out a handkerchief and cleaned up his dirty shoes. "If I were you, I would've eaten that food instead of spoiling it. The Earl told me to bring you food once a day all this week, to let you save some strength."

"Damn it. Haven't you heard what I said?" Rene burst out with strong language. "This isn't about a meal. If Jacques doesn't stop, he'll destroy the Elk Family. For my father's sake, open this cage!"

Seemingly, the steward was moved by what Rene said in the end.

As he was just about to leave, he stopped. "Your father? I think if he were still alive, he would've expelled you from this house." He then turned around and looked at Rene, expressionless. "Master, you seem to have forgotten that it was Roland Wimbledon who killed the Earl of the Elk Family. On the other hand, the Honeysuckle Family has not only gone over to Prince Roland's side, but also assisted him in suppressing the other four families. At this moment, your elder brother is trying to correct this mistake, yet you're scared to death. How can you be a qualified knight this way?"

"It's not for you to judge whether I'm a qualified knight," Rene said angrily. "In the past three years, while I was defeating the demonic beasts in Hermes' defensive line, Jacques was busy enjoying wine and women in the King's City. Do you think it's out of bravery that he decided to attack the Honeysuckle Family? Don't be ridiculous. He's only blinded by profit!"

Sean sighed. "Even if you're the younger brother of Milord Jacques, you should show him some basic respect. After all, he is both an Earl and the head of the Elk Family."

After this, the steward ignored Rene and left the basement along the stairs. When the door was closed, the basement returned to silence.

"Damn it!"

The second son of the Elk Family smashed his fist down onto the floor forcefully.

Since the beginning of winter, Jacques had begun to visit the other families more often. Rene didn't pay much attention to it at first—after all, he wasn't interested in managing his family. Besides, when he was taken captive by His Royal Highness the first time, Jacques refused to pay the ransom, and it was Petrov who offered him a helping hand and got him released from prison. Since then, the relationship between the two brothers had fallen to the freezing point. Even so, Rene didn't plan to fight with his brother about who would be head of the household. When he heard the news about the construction of Border Town, he even considered going to the town and serving Prince Roland by becoming an official guarding knight. But afterwards, there were some changes in the situation. During a private feast held in the Elk mansion, Rene heard that the four families were planning to unite and fight together against Longsong Stronghold.

That night, Rene rushed into Jacques' study and confronted him, but Jacques wasn't happy about it and threw him out. Thinking about it overnight, Rene decided to tell Petrov the news and lead his patrolmen to stop Jacques. Unexpectedly, his breakfast was poisoned by Jacques. When Rene woke up, he found himself in prison.

Since then, despite his yelling and threatening, he hadn't yet earned himself a chance to meet with Jacques. Every day, he could only judge time by looking at the brightness of a louver in the basement corner, and the only person he had seen was Jacques's personal steward.

"Grrr..."

With this lengthy growl coming from his stomach, he realized that he was hungry.

Taking a glimpse at the scattered food on the floor, Rene turned his head and lay back onto the pile of straw on the floor. "I'd better go to sleep... I won't feel hungry once I fall asleep."

The moment Rene closed his eyes, a series of footsteps resounded in the basement.

"Could it be... Jacques coming?" He instantly hopped off the pile of straw and rushed to the bars. With the help of the dim light from the louver, he saw a small and slim figure. Obviously, that couldn't be the arrogant Earl.

"Brother, are you OK?" When the person arrived at the cell, he found it was Aurelia, the third daughter of the Elk Family.

"How did you get in?"

"Jacques wasn't around, and those servants couldn't stop me." Aurelia saw the oatmeal on the floor and said incredulously, "Is this what they are serving you? This is outrageous! Wait a moment. I'll tell the kitchen to cook something else for you."

"Jacques isn't home?" What his sister said suddenly saddened Rene, and he almost forgot about his hunger. "Where did he go?"

"I've no idea... He left two days ago," Aurelia shook her head and said, "along with most of the house guards. Otherwise, I couldn't have come here."

"Damn it." Rene was disappointed. "Jacques left two days ago, and today is the third day—even if I can get out now, I'm afraid it's already too late.

"Brother, I heard that Jacques was trying to hurt the Honeysuckle Family. Is this true?" Aurelia looked worried. "Will Milord Petrov be alright?"

"Right... Aurelia has always had a crush on Petrov Hull. Although I've tried to set them up as a couple, it seems my friend Petrov has somebody else in mind. But now nothing can be done." Rene leaned against the bars and sat down, feeling feeble. He knew Jacques fully well. "Jacques won't show mercy on the Hull Family, which would definitely cause Prince Roland to take his rage out on the whole Western Region."

"Jacques has spent too much time in the King's City, so he's no idea what he's got himself into..." Rene closed his eyes. He couldn't stop thinking about the day when he and his army attacked Border Town—fires continued blazing in front of his eyes; thunder boomed all around his ears unceasingly; knights in the front rows seemed to be hitting an invisible wall; and their skills, gained through years of training and the courage of fighting for honor, had all lost their effectiveness in the face of the enemies' powerful weapons.

From that moment on, Rene had totally lost the intention of

fighting against His Highness ever again.

Nobody could defeat His Highness' troops—at least no human beings could.

"But when Prince Roland gets to know what's happening in Stronghold and decides to sweep through this area, what's the use then if the Elk Family gains a lot of profit? This time... Prince Roland may not let go of the four families."

"What's the matter, brother?" Aurelia shook him, but he remained motionless.

"The Elk Family is screwed."

Just then, some indistinct roars spread through the thick ceiling, and then the floor slightly trembled. It felt as if the mansion was hit by something.

"Is that what I think it is?" Rene turned around, and saw his sister with the same surprised expression.

Then came another dull, yet much clearer, thundering and a series of noises. Rene could hear panicked shouts from his family's servants coming from somewhere over his head.

"Could it be... Prince Roland's army coming?" Rene was stunned.
"How's that even possible?"

"What's happening out there?" Aurelia stood up. "I'll check."

"Don't." Rene grabbed her hand. "Don't go anywhere. Just wait here."

"Huh?"

"Listen to me..." Rene swallowed, and said in a tiresome voice, "It might be dangerous outside."

The roars quieted down before long. Only a few minutes later, a platoon invaded the basement—they wore brown uniforms and held strange, long-handled weapons. At a glance, Rene realized they were Prince Roland's troops.

He felt totally hopeless. He had expected retaliation from His Highness, but not so quickly!

"Or maybe this is a drama directed and played by Prince Roland himself?"

"Who are you?! How dare you break into the Earl's mansion!" Aurelia stood up and questioned them.

A tall, strong man stepped out of the platoon. With an angular face and a chilling aura around his eyes, he looked as if he was from an alien race.

"Are you the second son of the Elk Family, Knight Rene Medde?" the guy asked.

"Since you know who he is, you... should retreat. What are you up to?" Aurelia said, voice trembling, but still she stood in front of the bars.

"I'm Rene! Don't hurt her... She's innocent!"

Rene thought he was about to see something unbearable, yet the guy totally ignored Aurelia, and what he said next simply shocked Rene.

"I'm Iron Axe, Commander of the First Army. His Highness Roland asked me to find you specifically," the guy said in a low voice, "and he asked me to tell you that Mr. Petrov wants to see you."

Chapter 451: Aspirations

Rene walked out of the Earl's mansion, squinted instinctively, and took a deep breath. It'd been half a month since he last saw daylight and snow.

To Rene's surprise, there were soldiers in uniform everywhere, not shamelessly plundering the mansion, but guarding crossroads in an orderly fashion. A few blood stains dotted the snowy ground, but there were neither bodies nor scattered clothing around, which meant the soldiers didn't pillage the dead when they cleared the battlefield. What he saw confirmed his supposition that these troops were different from any he'd ever seen.

"Is Petrov alright? " He looked at Iron Axe. "How is... Longsong Stronghold?"

"Everything is alright." The tall, strong, foreign man spoke very little, but he'd answer as long as Rene asked.

"That means Jacques Medde's plan didn't work." Rene was slightly relieved. "If Stronghold is intact and the Honeysuckle Family is unharmed, Petrov is bound to put in a good word for me." He didn't care about Jacques' fate. "That idiot almost dragged the Elk Family into a catastrophe, so whatever happened to him isn't my concern."

"Brother... what on earth did Jacques do?" Aurelia leaned over and asked quietly.

Rene hesitated, shook his head and said, "I don't know."

Aurelia instantly made an expression as if to say "you're lying".

Rene smiled bitterly. He really didn't know how to answer that question... He couldn't simply say that Jacques intended to rebel, because he only knew about the planning stages and didn't know how that plan turned out. After some silence, he asked, "Do you really want to go to the castle with me?"

"Of course. I'm very curious about what exactly happened to give these men a reason to break into the Earl's mansion in broad daylight." She stared at Iron Axe and said, "I think Milord Petrov wouldn't just sit by and do nothing about it."

Rene understood that his sister was actually worried about Petrov, so he finally nodded and said, "Alright. If you ask him in person, he might tell you the details."

The group of people rode on horseback for about an hour along the snow covered roads and reached the Stronghold castle at noon.

With Iron Axe leading the way, Rene and his sister stepped onto the third floor, which was heavily guarded by sentries placed every few steps.

When he entered a room that looked like a study, Rene finally saw Petrov Hull, his childhood friend. However, Petrov only stood next to his desk respectfully. A gray-haired man sat by the desk,

looking at Rene and Aurelia with interest and playing with a quill pen. Almost instantly, Rene recognized who this man was.

He instantly went down on one knee. "Your Highness, Rene Medde is here to salute you."

"He is ..." Aurelia was a little surprised, but Rene tugged her clothes gently and hinted at her to bend a knee and bow.

"We met each other in Longsong Stronghold," the prince said with a smile, "right in the castle's basement. According to what Iron Axe just told me, you were locked up there again?"

"Uh..." Rene was embarrassed and didn't know what he should say.

Luckily, the prince wasn't expecting an answer. "Please rise. Before I ordered the attack on the Elk territory, Petrov had repeatedly assured me that you would never take part in Jacques Medde's rebellion, and it seems he was right about you. But... how did you end up in the basement?"

Rene cast an appreciative look at Petrov and told the prince what had happened in his family.

"I see." The prince nodded. "It's a shame. If you could have stopped Earl Jacques, Longsong Stronghold wouldn't have gone through this disaster."

That remark shocked Rene, and Aurelia couldn't help but ask, "What... happened?"

"Jacques Medde colluded with the Maple Leaf, Wolf, and Wild Rose families, and they attacked Longsong Stronghold two days ago." The prince said coldly, "The attack led to mass casualties of innocent people, and two blocks were burnt down. To force the Honeysuckle Family to surrender, they even hurt Petrov's family."

Rene couldn't believe his ears. "Even when fighting a rival noble, threatening them with their families is considered very shameful. How could Jacques do that?"

"This rebellion involved many parties, but I assure you that no one involved in the attack will escape the punishment of the law—all the rebels will be severely punished!" The prince knocked on the desk and said, "I came to Stronghold to clean the entire Western Region and not let a single rat slip through my fingers!"

Rene felt his back break into a sweat. "Your Highness, I..."

Roland waved his hand to interrupt him. "Don't worry, I won't take my anger out on innocent people, and the Elk Family's offspring will be spared. Actually, I have a question for you. Jacques Medde was killed in the rebellion, so are you willing to inherit the title of Earl and serve me, just as Hull does?"

There was only one answer to this question. Rene Medde knelt down without hesitation, a standard gesture of a knight, and he pledged to faithfully serve the prince.

To his surprise, he felt quite calm while pledging his oath.

Actually, he had never hated this prince who took his father's life. "In a battle field, anything could happen to anyone. Moreover, it was not the prince but Duke Ryan and the other five families who started the war. After the war, the prince didn't treat the defeated noblemen harshly, and he also exchanged captives for ransom, a conventional practice among the nobility. If father hadn't died in the battle field, he probably could've gone back to our territory safe and sound, just as the Earl of Honeysuckle did."

Rene was trained as a knight and held the values of a knight deep in his heart—"A battle is plausible as long as it's righteous, and what Jacques did was not only unrighteous, but also had no purpose except to exacerbate hostility."

For the sake of Aurelia and all the other innocent members of his family, he must accept His Highness' offer. Without the protection of the Elk Family, these people would not be able to live a stable life ever again.

After the pledge, the prince smiled and nodded. "In the following days, you and your sister can live in the castle. Petrov will arrange rooms for you. There are still a few members from other families that escaped who are fighting in the suburbs, so it's better for you to wait until this rebellion quiets down before returning to your territory."

"Yes, Your Highness."

As Rene left the study, Petrov followed.

Looking at his haggard friend, Rene felt a range of emotions. "I'm sorry..."

"It's not your fault." Petrov patted on his shoulder. "Don't worry about it."

Somehow, Rene felt his friend was a lot different. He could see in Petrov's eyes a look he had never seen before—a subtle resolution and calmness that was as strong as steel that had been repeatedly tempered with fire.

Rene realized that his friend was on his way to becoming a real leader.

Chapter 452: The Unification

The rebelling nobles were powerless against the First Army, and it only took a round of firing in every confrontation to decide the victor. The First Army didn't even need to change cartridges before their enemies dispersed and ran away with their tails between their legs. Moreover, the enemies usually didn't even put up a fight, and the First Army only had to pursue and capture them.

Iron Axe cleared through one territory per day and quickly conquered the regions governed by the Elk, Wolf, and Wild Rose families. However, when the troops reached the Maple Leaf territory, they began slowing down.

They encountered some unexpected issues.

"Damn it. This is no different from Stronghold." Brian stared at the Earl's looming castle and spat angrily. "It's protected by a moat!"

"Was anyone hurt in the past round of attacks?" asked Iron Axe coldly.

"Two unlucky men were wounded, one in the arm and the other in the back while retreating, but it doesn't seem serious," said Brian, frowning. "The soldiers were at a great disadvantage because they were shooting upwards from the ground, so even if the enemies only had bows and bolts, they could still contend with us."

Iron Axe knew that Brian was right. No one had expected the Earl of the Maple Leaf Family to have a castle built like a tower which was supported by mountains and cliffs. The streams from the Impassable Mountain Range were led into a five-meter-wide ditch that formed a small moat surrounding the castle. Since the water was constantly flowing, although there were blocks of floating ice and snow, the moat was not frozen solid. The gate was the only entrance into the tower, so in order to reach it, they had to cross the bridge, where the enemy's force was most concentrated.

There were no concealments around the Earl's castle, only plains of snow, so standing on the higher ground made up for the enemies' disadvantage of using crossbow bolts. After two rounds of probing attacks, the First Army only shot down three or four people and suffered many casualties themselves.

"I wish we'd brought cannons with us," said Brian bitterly. "If we shot a few cannonballs at their gate, they would surrender in no time."

"It's too bad that the troops can't bring them here because it's too far from Stronghold, and the snow's too deep." Iron Axe glanced at the sky. "Let's call it a day and arrange for the troops to set up camp."

The territory of the Maple Leaf Family was northwest of Longsong Stronghold, next to Impassable Mountain Range, and it lay on the border of the Western Region. Simply walking here took almost a day, and the uncleared snow on the paths made it impossible to transport a 12-pound field artillery.

According to reports, the Maple Leaf Family barely contributed to the rebellion, and even the Earl himself didn't participate. This meant that their resources and power were all intact and stored in this guarded tower, making it very difficult to deal with without siege weapons.

At night, bonfires were lit in the camp's tents.

"What should we do tomorrow?" Brian asked, tossing wood into the fire pit. "Order the soldiers to rush against the rain of arrows? As long as we can blast through that damn steel door, they're done for."

"But the First Army would also lose dozens of soldiers." Iron Axe shook his head and didn't answer. If he were still in the Iron Sand City, he would gladly sacrifice hundreds of soldiers to complete his mission without feeling regretful. However, after he came to the Western Region, he felt somewhat protective of the soldiers whom he watched improve and whom His Highness Roland put so much effort into.

After a long pause, he sighed. "Let's use the witches."

Brian was shocked. "The witches?"

Iron Axe didn't want to do this either. He remembered the prince had once told him that a decent army should be able to complete its mission independently at all times. However, this was not important at the moment. In order to reach their goal of uniting the Western Region in a week and to minimize casualties, he was

willing to give up his pride.

Also, His Highness also said that a good general accounted for his soldiers' lives.

"Send a messenger and tell the prince that we're in trouble and need Miss Maggie's help." He ordered.

The next morning, Maggie and Lightning came to the camp.
"What happened?"

"Coo coo?"

Iron Axe coughed and explained his dilemma. "The enemies are mainly concentrated at the top of the tower, so rifles can do little damage to them. There's also a steel door blocking the entrance, so the First Army can't get close enough to place explosives. We can only rely on you to open the gates."

"We've got this," the little girl said, patting her chest.

Throwing explosives was a familiar task to them, and they were even trained with the First Army in the small town. Iron Axe nodded and immediately arranged the soldiers to begin the last attack—even if the explosives didn't have the desired effect, they would at least scare the enemies and give themselves enough time to break through the steel door.

"Are you fighting as well?" Brian watched surprisedly as Iron Axe

strapped a rifle to his back and stuffed a few cartridges of bullets into his belt.

"Rather than say 'charge for me', say 'charge with me'." Iron Axe smiled. "His Highness always said this."

...

When the two men led their soldiers into the charging position, Maggie's figure appeared in the sky.

She transformed into a giant beast and charged towards the tower, her claws grabbing a bag of the new explosives. Everyone witnessed this stunning scene and the First Army erupted in cheers, while the side on top of the tower descended into chaos. The mercenaries and guards of the Maple Family all turned their crossbow bolts around and began shooting at the beast with no avail.

Meanwhile, Maggie finished collecting her strength, flapped her wings forcefully, rose rapidly into the air, and released the bag. The bag of explosives shot towards the top of the tower like a cannonball...

Iron Axe felt his surroundings go quiet, and then he saw a glaring ball of fire rise from the top of the tower. Suddenly, the earth began to shake! The entire world seemed to be trembling, and huge columns of smoke shot up through the snow. A heat wave struck him in the face, forcing him to stumble back a few steps with his ears ringing.

This is... the power of God!

Iron Axe couldn't help but recall the first time when he witnessed His Highness' gunpowder test, but the explosion this time was much more powerful. Even standing almost a hundred meters away, he could feel the scalding heat of the fire ball. As for the enemies close to God's Punishment at the top of the tower, their fates were all easily imaginable.

He quietly prayed to the Three Gods, raised his rifle high, and shouted, "For His Highness the prince, First Army, charge!"

"For His Highness!" The soldiers echoed his words and swarmed to the Earl's castle.

This time... no one dared to stop them.

When Iron Axe returned to Longsong Stronghold, it was already the sixth night.

The entire Western Region was finally under Roland's control.

Chapter 453: Dealing With The Aftermath

The Stronghold's castle office was much roomier than that of the small town. Tall bookshelves with gilded edges lined the walls to his left and right and were filled with all kinds of books. The bookshelves provided any subject he could dream of, from epics to travel notes. In order to reach the books on the upper levels, a wooden ladder was placed next to the bookshelves for easy access.

Probably out of safety concerns, the only waist-high window in the office was equipped with metal railings on the outside. When the daylight hit the room, he could clearly see a stripe of sun ray splash over the old fur rug while feeling a sense of aloofness as if he were standing against the world.

"Anna would definitely love this place," Roland couldn't help thinking. However, to him, the brightly lit town office with large windows suited his taste better. Even though it was small, it was comfortable.

As for Nightingale, he could tell by her habit of sleeping by the fireplace that she would not like it here at all.

Suddenly, someone knocked on his door.

"Come in." Roland placed the Secret History of the Western Region he was holding back onto the bookshelf.

"Your Highness." Petrov Hull entered the office and placed a stack of paper onto his desk. "I've finished collecting the data you

asked for."

Roland walked back to his desk and read through the list of the nobles carefully. "These are all the nobles left in the Western Region?"

"Yes." Petrov explained, "They're divided into two main categories, guilty and innocent. After that, I ranked them by family names. There are 64 people who are guilty, and 137 people who refused to rebel or had no knowledge of the rebellion. The innocent people are mostly free knights, knights, and lower-level nobles."

Roland flipped to the first page and saw the name of Roman Candy, the Earl of Maple Leaf Family, listed on the top. According to Iron Axe's report, this great noble hid in a wine barrel in his basement after his castle was seized, and he soiled his pants out of fear when the First Army found him. He was also the noble with the highest rank among the captured in the war of unification.

Next was an entire page of the nobles from the Maple Family, which included two sons, other relatives, and knights.

Roland quickly finished reading the list and felt very satisfied. "Great job."

The six families of the Western Region had literally become history—Lion Ryan, Maple Leaf, Wolf, and Wild Rose were completely crushed, and although Honeysuckle and Elk still remained, they were no longer feudal nobles. Now, all the power

in the Western Region belonged to Roland.

"Your Highness..." Petrov hesitated for a bit before asking, "Sir Iron Axe convicted the people on that list. Could there be any... misjudgment?"

Roland couldn't help chuckling. "He's a very skilled interrogator and didn't use torture to force confessions, so I think his final judgment is trustworthy."

Meanwhile, his interrogation was just a matter of formality. After all the nobles were locked into prison, Nightingale double checked each of them—it only took her a few simple questions to determine if they had involved in the rebellion. This was also why Roland felt confident in addressing the noble with a heavy hand. With Nightingale's help, he could ensure that he wasn't missing any guilty people or condemning any innocent ones. He didn't have to worry about shedding innocent blood or exonerating the real culprits.

"So... what do you plan to do with the guilty nobles?"

"Why do you ask?" Roland raised his head and glanced at Petrov. "Are some of these men your friends?"

"No, Your Highness." He shook his head. "I just think that if you hanged them all, it might harm your future rule."

"You were talking about an eye for an eye a week ago." The prince

raised his eyebrow curiously. "Now you want to spare them?"

"I do want all these people to go to hell, but even if I strangle them all to death myself, it wouldn't change anything... It might even cause the other nobles to hate the Honeysuckle Family. Also, if everyone learns that you've executed the nobles, other cities might resist your rule."

After hearing this, Roland was quite surprised. This was the logic of a seasoned politician, who set aside personal emotion while weighing the pros and cons... "It seems that this battle hasn't made him hate fighting but actually helped him become mature."

"It doesn't hurt to tell you this beforehand." He stood up and walked to the window. "I'm going to announce everything about this matter to the people and hold an open trial for all the rebels at the square, including the nobilities, guards, squires, and mercenaries... the ringleaders and direct organizers of the rebellion, as well as scoundrels with the people's blood on their hands. They will all be hanged. People who are guilty of following their orders will be stripped of their titles and sent to the North Slope Mine."

"This way, only five or six noblemen will be hanged. The Earl of the Elk Family and the Viscount of the Wolf Family died in battles, so those who survived will be trading their titles for their lives. When the message gets out, I don't think anyone will see this as too harsh a punishment—after all, rebelling against the king is a capital offense."

Petrov sighed in relief. "Your Highness is merciful."

When the eldest son of the Honeysuckle Family left, Roland felt an unfamiliar feeling of satisfaction.

This operation had cleared all the obstacles for him in the Western Region, so he could easily make laws and distribute orders throughout this vast land.

More importantly, he gained the support from many people and nobles—after the rebels were removed, only supporters would remain.

This was especially true for the nobles—after losing their feudal and legislative power, they would have to wholeheartedly follow and spread his policies if they wanted to continue living a comfortable life. Since the nobles had more resources than civilians, it wouldn't take them much thought to figure out how to profit from them.

Once they started to gain small profits, they wouldn't ever want to go back to their old lives —after all, these low-level nobles had never gained much from their territories, and sometimes even went into debt if they didn't manage them well. They would soon realize that as long as they played by the rules, they would live an unimaginably comfortable life.

There was no doubt that he had taken a big step toward his city-building plan.

Roland wiped off the water vapor on his window and looked at

the city enveloped in snow—since he still had to stay in Longsong Stronghold for a while to deal with governmental affairs, he might as well refurbish this office to his own liking.

For example... he would start with the French windows.

Chapter 454: Pensions And Punishment

Roland made a speech at the theater of Longsong Stronghold three days later.

To advertise the speech, he asked Petrov to relate the details of the rebellion to the entire city beforehand and also instructed Maggie to bring Echo from Border Town.

There was a smaller audience than he had expected. Although it was already spring, the endless snow stopped people from going outside.

Fortunately, driven by the prince's promise that "soldiers killed in action will be well compensated", all members of the Second Army and their families came to the theater. It would take Roland some time to earn trust from the rest of his subjects, but Roland believed the best marketing was word of mouth. Once the seed was sown, it would spread its roots to more people. This was the reason he insisted on an army consisting of ordinary men.

They were as sharp as swords, as impregnable as fortresses, and perfect role models for publicity.

"Good morning, my subjects. I'm the lord of the Western Region, Roland Wimbledon. I believe most of you have already heard my name." Roland surveyed the audience and continued, "First of all, I'd like to express my deepest sorrow and grief for those who were injured or lost their lives in the rebellion. This was a conspiracy plotted in King's City. In order to disturb the peaceful Western

Region, Timothy has tried to wage war against us numerous times. Unfortunately, the four families of Western Region didn't side with the people, but instead helped the wicked perpetuate wicked deeds, thus causing this tragedy."

The prince did not linger on the details of the rebellion. Compared with a formal speech, people were usually more interested in the rumors circulated in taverns. Therefore, he soon switched to the more popular topic of compensation after a brief introduction.

"During the rebellion, 56 out of 112 soldiers in the Second Army were killed in action. In addition, rebels looted and burned the residences, leading to 48 deaths among civilians and reducing 12 properties to ashes," Roland spoke in a low voice. "I hereby apologize to the subjects in Longsong Stronghold. As the lord of the territory, I've failed to fulfill my obligations."

The prince's words stirred up the audience, who apparently had never heard any royal family members apologize to civilians. Many of them were shocked and startled, but Roland thought this was the attitude a lord should have. He was not as inscrutably arrogant as other nobles, who always treated civilians with an air of scorn and condescension. History taught him that a ruler would not be truly accepted by his people unless he viewed them as his equals.

"I promise that those people won't die for nothing! Not only would soldiers killed in battle receive a proper burial, but their families would also receive a pension of five gold royals. Plus, they can apply for food and charcoals from the City Hall as additional compensation every month in the future. This pension plan is

exactly the same as the First Army's, and I assure you subjects who join the Second Army as of today will also be equally compensated!"

Few people cheered for the prince's promise. Apparently, most of them were skeptical about Roland's alleged pension plan. Corruption and briberies among officials were normal on this land, so even winter relief rations were sometimes mixed with sand and leaves. How could they possibly believe that they would receive gold royals?

Nevertheless, Roland had already thought of a solution to maximize the effects of his advertising. He clapped his hands, and two soldiers from the First Army came up to the stage with a vault, followed by Petrov and Iron Axe. "I've got a list of the soldiers who sacrificed themselves in the battle here. Now the governor of Longsong Stronghold, Petrov Hull, will distribute pensions to you personally!"

When the soldiers dumped the shiny gold royals on the table, the audience finally became a little more enthusiastic.

"Ayat, from the First Gun Battalion of the Second Army!"

"Chapiter, from the First Gun Battalion of the Second Army!"

"..."

As Iron Axe slowly read out the names on the list, the soldiers'

family members went up to the stage one by one and took the gold royals with excitement, bowing and kneeling in gratitude. For a time the theater was so chaotic that Roland felt Nightingale lay her hands upon his waist.

Fortunately, there were no accidents. By the time everybody had received their pensions, it was almost noon. Roland waved his arm to silence the murmuring audience. "Those who lost their homes during the war will also receive a shelter and food. Food will be delivered to you by assigned staff until the Months of the Demons end."

"Y-Your Highness, what about after the Months of the Demons?" asked someone in a loud voice. Of course, the "inquirer" was created by Echo.

"By then, the City Hall will have created a great number of jobs with competitive salaries and benefits. As long as you're willing to work hard, you don't need to worry about food!" Roland raised his right hand and announced, "The Western Region won't forget those who have contributed, and neither will I!"

This time his speech received a warm welcome as the audience raised their right hands in response. While the subjects cheered for the speech, Roland instructed his men to distribute the porridge, bringing people's high spirits to a peak.

By the afternoon, many more people had gathered at the theater. Since all the seats were occupied, many people squatted in the hallway, obviously waiting to watch the trial.

It seems everybody loves to see a prisoner be prosecuted, both in the world I used to live in and the current one.

Roland asked Iron Axe and Petrov to conduct the execution, while he himself sat in a box on the second floor of the theater as one of the spectators.

The verdict had been reached long before. The prisoners were led onto the stage and lined up on their knees in front of the spectators, with armed soldiers standing solemnly behind them. Iron Axe read out the counts, and Petrov the verdicts, after which the soldiers escorted them to the execution ground, the Stronghold Square.

At the sight of the prisoners, some of the victims' family members went up to tussle with them. As long as the fight was not life-threatening, the First Army just stood by. Nobody took pity on these scoundrels, who should have known the subsequent consequences the moment they committed murder and plunder.

In the end, 132 prisoners were sentenced to death, six of whom were great nobles. The rest were mercenaries, guards, and servants. The execution methods varied. Since gallows were limited in number, only the nobles had the privilege to be hanged, whereas others were shot. It was also the first time firearms were used for execution.

The other 900 people who had participated in the rebellion but had not committed murder were imprisoned, awaiting to be sent

to the North Slope Mine in batches.

Now, Roland had weeded out all the nobles who challenged his authority in the Western Region.

The following day, he summoned the innocent nobles to the castle hall.

As it was just the beginning of the cleanup, he still had a lot of work to do before he could truly rule this region.

The most important step was to establish a new order.

Chapter 455: The Second Step Of City Construction

Roland arranged a feast for the nobles to ease their minds.

A long table covered with a white tablecloth stood at the center of the hall, with a large variety of delicacies, delicious wines, and beautifully arranged flowers on it. The nobles were seated on either side of the table facing each other.

After drinking a few glasses of red wine, everybody seemed to feel more comfortable and less stressful. Given that the Honeysuckles and the Elks were both Roland's supporters and that all of the great nobles had been crushed, these petty nobles were unlikely to strike up a discordant tune at this hour. On the contrary, they voluntarily revealed their intentions to stand on Roland's side during the conversation. Under such circumstances, Roland knew it was time to talk about his new policies.

After they all had been fed, he distributed the booklet that was prepared beforehand to each noble.

It was the "marketing graphic book" which he carefully designed and drafted.

"Your Highness... what's this?" As he expected, the nobles soon asked in surprise, "Why are the drawings in this book are so lifelike?"

"Yes, they look so real."

"It doesn't look like a picture... No paint can express such delicate colors."

They were, no doubt, nobles from the big city, who knew how to properly appreciate artwork. Roland clapped his hands and replied with a smile, "They are indeed illustrated by a painter. The only difference is she's a witch, and the paints she has used are actually her ubiquitous magic power."

All of the nobles were startled by these words, not sure whether they should put down the booklet or not.

"The local church has fallen from power. What are you worried about?" The prince said, raising his brows, "Witches are no different from us. I've confirmed that myself many times."

"Uhhmm... Uhm." Petrov almost choked. "Your Highness is right."

"Of course Your Highness is correct. Haha..." the other nobles chimed in, managing to summon up a laugh.

"Um... looks like I just said something that contains an unintended meaning." Roland put on a look of indifference and switched the topic while thinking. Ever since he became a prince over a year ago, he had noticed that his ability to remain unflappable amid changes had improved by leaps and bounds—or

rather he had become increasingly bold. "The point is the story inside it. The drawings are just to make it more readable and interesting."

While the nobles were still absorbed in the story, Aurelia, the Elks' girl, looked up abruptly and asked, "Is this the family history of a noble?"

"Aurelia!" Rene reminded her while lowering his voice, "You should call the prince Your Highness!"

"Correct. He used to be a noble in the Western Region." Roland gestured Rene that it was fine and then continued, "Some of you may still remember him."

"Your Highness... I know him," answered one knight. "His name is Tigui Pine. We used to be neighbors and his territory used to be adjacent to mine."

"I also met him once," someone else recalled. "He was just a Baron back then. His father was a feudatory of Joe Kohl. But since Lord Joe left the Western Region, his territory has diminished."

"Viscount Tigui is currently living in Border Town." Roland said, smiling, "The graphic book records how we met... as well as what happened later. As you can see, he's a noble living in a society regulated by the new system. He's now busy practicing flintlock. I expect that right after the Months of Demons, he'll take his daughter and guards to Misty Forest to have some fun hunting there. As far as I know, ever since he sold his territory to the east

of Stronghold and settled down in Border Town, not only has he been promoted to a higher rank, but his properties have increased by several times as well."

Fear originated from the unknown. The same held true for changes to the system. As the nobles were ignorant of what impacts all these changes would bring about, they abhorred anything foreign or unfamiliar. In order to reduce their fear and resistance, Roland picked Tigui Pine as a living example and asked Soraya to sketch out his life in a cartoon format. Compared with those dull biographies, cartoons apparently presented the details of the story in a more vivid way.

"You may have known that I'm planning to build a city in the Western Region. In fact, I've been thinking about that for quite a long time. By then, Border Town, Longsong Stronghold, and the narrow land in between will all be consolidated into one," Roland continued, "someone may ask how the two towns, so distant from each other, can possibly be connected. I have to say that the unification will be confined only to administration. In other words, the new city will be governed by the same laws and policies. This is also the reason I take back nobles' feudal and legislative powers."

"Your Highness, but our territories..." somebody asked.

"They'll still be yours," he interrupted. "Like I said, you won't lose anything except these two types of power. The very nature of feudalism is to grant lands to others who will then become your subordinates, and thereby expanding your influences, leading lower nobles to defend against enemies and fight for profits for

you. However, a professionally trained army will be responsible for city defenses under the new system. As long as you follow the rules, you'll gain far more than you used to. After all, you benefit more from slicing up a bigger cake than sharing a small one."

While the nobles were silent, Roland sipped tea before continuing his persuasion. "You've never been to Border Town, so it's perfectly normal that you don't know how much you can actually gain. In fact, the town's revenues for the latter half of the year reached 30,000 gold royals. It could have been 10,000 more if the Months of the Demons hadn't come so soon."

The nobles all gasped out. "30... 30,000?"

Roland had learned the annual financial situation of Stronghold from Petrov a long time ago. The annual income of the City Hall was no more than 30,000, and these petty nobles obviously earned much less than that. 100 gold royals would be a fortune to them.

"As you'll be administrators of trades of all kinds in the future, you'll certainly be well paid." Roland went on, "Back to the consolidation matter—aside from the unification of administration, the two towns will also be closer geographically. For example, it takes me one day to travel from Border Town to Longsong Stronghold now. Once the construction of Kingdom Main Street is completed, it'll take less than a day to cover the distance on foot, and half a day by horse or bike, not to mention other faster transportation methods."

"What's a bike?" Aurelia questioned curiously.

"A manually operated riding apparatus that runs fast on a flat surface." The prince mused, "I bet in five years... no, in three years we'll be able to work in Border Town after having breakfast in Stronghold." As Kingdom Main Street ran straight between Stronghold and Border Town, it reduced the distance to a mere 60 kilometers, allowing people to travel within half an hour by tram or car.

Nevertheless, most of the nobles cared little about transportation. The knight who claimed to be Tigui Pine's neighbor asked cautiously, "Your Highness, by what you just said, did you mean that you want us to manage Stronghold?"

"Yes and no." Roland shrugged. "Like I said, the consolidation of the two towns will be limited only to administration. The Stronghold will become a district of the city, directly administered by the City Hall. But considering commuting a day to work still sounds quite unrealistic, for the time being, I'll set up a secondary City Hall in Longsong District. It'll operate in the same way as Border Town, with multiple secondary departments under it. You'll work in those secondary departments dealing with local matters."

"Secondary... departments?" the nobles echoed, looking bewildered.

"It isn't simple to manage a town. Although you'll get paid well, it won't be that easy to do your part," Roland said bluntly. "Therefore, I need you to come to Border Town with me once we've re-established order here. I want you to see with your own

eyes what a well-functioning City Hall should look like. With respect to city management, you've got a lot to learn."

Chapter 456: The Differences

After explaining the administrative integration plan, Roland raised his cup and took several slow sips while waiting for everyone to process the information.

He needed a lot of people in order to maintain the area's daily perimeter patrol. In a time before the general literacy rate improved, he had to rely on the nobles. Most of them had their primary education and they had experience in management. If there was a noble that distinguished himself from the others, he would promote them and place them in charge of a city or territory on behalf of himself. If he was still living in his previous world, this position would be referred to as a governor or a mayor.

Several minutes later, Roland brought up the next topic.

It was time to crack down on crime.

In his idea about the new order, the Black Street organization wasn't needed. Everyone in the city could find work and they didn't need to pillage, so there was no demand for stolen goods. He probably couldn't have accomplished this in a highly developed, modern city with a population in the ten million range. The over saturation of minimum-wage jobs in the market would create a high unemployment rate. Fortunately, the population of the Western Region, including Longsong Stronghold and the whole suburban area was no more than 60 to 70 thousand people. Since the major development had yet to start, the townspeople could find work as long as they wanted a job.

"How much do you know about Rats?"

"You mean... Black Street Rats?" Rene Medde coughed. "I've done business with them before."

"What kind of business have you done with them?" Roland asked with interest.

"Um..." Rene swallowed hard, a little embarrassed. "I was the leader of the Ragingfire, and I fought with several Rat gangs over territory."

"Bahaha." Several people broke into laughter.

Roland was astonished. He had never expected that the Earl's second son used to deal with Rats. Besides, Ragingfire... was such a lackluster name. He started to doubt the legitimacy of Rene being the Earl Medde's son.

"Your Highness, the truth is," Petrov started to explain, "several years ago, Black Street Forces were running rampant at the dock. Almost every day both civilians and foreign businessmen were killed, and the patrols would turn a blind eye to the matter. Earl Rene couldn't stand it anymore, so he brought in his own guards and a group of people from the refugee camp and together they drove the Rats out of the dock. At the time, he was writing to me daily to keep me updated on the progress of the operation. I was far away at the King's City during that time. In the letter, he told me it was a war that equaled the one against the demonic beasts, so I think..."

"Petrov, that's enough." Rene interrupted, embarrassed. "I was bored and just wanted to do something to occupy myself at that time."

So that was the reason. It was just the impulsive, yet gallant, actions of a young noble, which was a demonstration of his chivalrous demeanor. Roland believed that the second son of the Elk, who loved fighting as a youth, enjoyed nothing more than to command a group of followers. So, while Ragingfire was not a real army in the sense, what they fought was indeed a real battle.

"What of this gang now?"

"Uh, I don't know." Rene scratched the back of his head. "After I went to defend Hermes and fight against the real demonic beasts, I stopped all contact."

Roland nodded. "Actually, I'm going to eradicate all the Rats in Stronghold to enable everyone to live a peaceful life."

"Your Highness, I'm sorry to say this," Rene hesitated before saying, "but... that's probably impossible."

"Why?" He frowned. "I have the First Army at my side. Are the Rats more difficult to deal with than the knights?"

"That's not what I mean." Rene seemed to be looking for the right words to phrase it. "They're weak, timid, and with no weapons or

armor. They don't even know any operation tactics, basically, they're by no means comparable to knights. However, if you execute them as you execute the rebels, that's to say, execute them just because they used to be Rats, I'm afraid there won't be many civilians left in Stronghold after the cleanup."

"You mean..." Roland said.

"Rats and civilians are mixed together, they are one and the same, Your Highness." Rene replied respectfully, "After a particularly bad year, when the Months of Demons are long, many civilians have to become Rats to sustain themselves. That's why most lords turn a blind eye to the existence of Black Street. An internal conflict is apparently better than an external riot caused by starvation."

Roland's face clouded over. He had never thought about how the Rats came into being. "What about their organizers?"

"A few of these people are habitual criminals and some of them are supported by the local nobles, but there are also some criminals from other towns."

"Well, I hope none of you are supporting any Rats now," the prince stated while glancing around the long table, sullen expression clear. All the nobles hung their heads in response. The prince sighed, "It doesn't matter now. As long as you help with my cleanup plan, I will forgive your past misdeeds." After a pause, he looked at Rene. "I have a task for you."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"In the coming month, I will be focusing on cracking down on all of the criminal activities in Stronghold. You should cooperate with the First Army to eliminate all of the Black Street gang leaders and completely break down all their organizations. As for the specific methods, I'll send someone to you with instructions."

"Your Highness, what about the citizens that are depending on them? Without the gangs to provide them with food, they are not likely to survive the Months of the Demons." Rene was worried. "Plus this year the Months of Demons arrived earlier than usual, so there might be even more people depending on them than in the previous years."

"I'll let Petrov open the barn and distribute food to the citizens until the end of the Months of Demons."

The nobles around the table started to protest, "Your Highness, that's not going to work!"

"That type of support will just make things worse!"

"After that, everybody in the town will become a beggar!"

All of the nobles ventured to prevent him.

Roland slammed his fist down, hitting the table hard. "I've made up my mind and I don't want to hear your protests any longer!"

Roland knew the nobles thought the worst of people and believed them to be lazy, ignorant, incompetent, and filthy. They believed that the citizens were very greedy in their nature and considered them to be absolutely hopeless. However, Roland thought differently and knew the strength of the people. They may appear dumb, but with guidance and a role model, they could be a game changer. If people were really as useless as the nobles thought, how were they able to keep changing the world?

In fact, trying to better people was the best investment. Even the slightest positive change would have a larger payoff than could be expected.

"Finally, I want you to spread this message as soon as possible." Roland looked to Petrov, "You have experience in this, so I want you to work on it. If the subjects can't read the message, get someone to read it to them. Just make sure the written message contains what we have talked about here today."

"All of what we have discussed?" Petrov asked with a surprised look. "Even the information about the Rats cleanup plan?"

"Yes, include that and the information about the barn opening to distribute food." Roland glanced at the nobles around the table, challenging them. "These are the conditions that create a well-functioning City Hall and are a necessity in order for it to run properly. Publicize the policies, answer the people's questions, and accept feedback. This is the best way to implement a change to policy."

Roland believed he needed to first teach the nobles, and then unify the law by consolidating the administration, as well as enhance public safety, all the while carrying out political propaganda before re-establishing order.

Chapter 457: The Music Of Fantasy

"You don't need to come with me." Echo walked along the Redwater River, the snow under her shoes crunching.

"Here the city isn't safe. It's not Border Town." Iron Axe walked behind her, with two steps between them. "His Highness told me to protect you if you leave the castle without other witches accompanying you."

"I shouldn't have told him." She mumbled, breathing out into the cold air. "Also, you don't need to call me lady anymore."

"You will always be the head of the Osha clan in my heart, my lady Drow Silvermoon."

When he mentioned Osha, Echo fell silent. Even though Iron Axe couldn't see her expression, he could feel Echo sadden at the mention of her clan. He wanted to console her, but he didn't know how or what to say. So, he just kept his mouth shut and followed her silently.

The branch of Redwater River that wound its way through the field outside of the city was different from the one that flowed into the inner city, which was almost a straight line. The river levees on both sides were covered by masonries, stacked, flat, and neat. About every ten steps, there was an opening with stairways to the river, which allowed the people to get water from the river.

Today's snow fall hadn't been too heavy and there were several

pedestrians on the street. The men and women would look at Echo with surprised expressions on their faces. Lady Silvermoon was tall, and shapely with a lovely figure. Her beige skin and long blue-gray hair were quite special and eye-catching. In the inland of the Kingdom of Graycastle, it was seldom that one would see a purebred from the Sand Nation.

"Let's switch to the other side of the river." Echo obviously wasn't enjoying the attention.

"Yes."

They cautiously stepped on a frozen arch bridge across over the river and then arrived at the eastern zone of Stronghold. There were almost no houses and vast areas of farmland were all covered by snow. What they could see was just limitless flatlands and a dim, black figure of the city wall. This area was in sharp contrast to the western zone of the city.

"This place is nothing like the Iron Sand City." Echo said. "When I was in the Southernmost Region, I thought everywhere was the same. The sands covered almost all of the ground. Water sources and the Oasis were the most valuable resources and people would fight to the death over them. However, here, no blood would be shed over the Redwater River. If they want to drink the water, they just need to crouch down and drink it."

"However, here they would fight for other things," Iron Axe said seriously, "such as gold royals, jewels, honor, status... There's no escape from fights."

"Really? But, Nightingale told me that our prince would end all disputes." She looked up at the cloudy sky. "No matter who you are, people of the Sand Nation or people of the Four Kingdoms, ordinary people or witches, you can enjoy equal rights and live a free life."

"I... I don't know." Iron Axe hesitated. He couldn't imagine that everyone would throw off all barriers and live together peacefully. He thought that even though His Highness had the power of the gods and he would undoubtedly conquer all of his enemies, it would just be impossible for him to make all of his enemies accept his dominance willingly. Making enemies during the process of conquering was an unavoidable by product of battle.

"Do you want to go back to Iron Sand City?" Echo suddenly asked.

"No, Lady Silvermoon," Iron Axe quickly came to his senses and answered without hesitation. "I've sworn to the Three Gods that I'll serve His Highness, Roland Wimbledon forever and help him to expand his territory. Don't worry my lady. His Highness has promised to seek revenge for you. Please believe in him. When you go back to Iron Sand City, no one will disrespect you."

"But I don't want to be the head of the Osha clan," she whispered. "I'd like to stay somewhere the trees are evergreen. I'd like to stay with Wendy and Nightingale. I'd like His Highness to teach me songs. I hope someday I can go back to have a look, but I don't want to live in the desert and continuously fight for water."

"Either way, you're the only successor of Osha in my heart." Iron Axe didn't speak his mind fully. Instead, he just looked down and said, "No one can force you."

They walked across the white field to an open area where Echo stopped. "I'll practice here. I don't think I will disturb anyone."

Iron Axe knew that her power was to make various sounds and she usually practiced in the backyard of the town's castle. But this time, in order to not disturb the important meeting between His Highness and the nobles, she intentionally chose here to practice her power.

He nodded and took two steps back. "I'll stand guard for you."

"Oh, I made a song for our hometown." Echo turned around, "Would you like to hear?"

"A Song?" Iron Axe was a little surprised.

"Yes, I learned to use the arrangement method His Highness taught me. I now mix various instruments' sounds together to add a layering effect and build complexity," Echo talked about this with a relaxed expression on her face. "I've tried it and to my surprise, it worked. I didn't know a song could be so pleasant. Each added tone would add in a distinct feeling. I don't know where His Highness learned this method though. When I was sold to King's City, I never heard anything about something like this from any noble."

"Prince Roland was always special," said Iron Axe, he believed the Gods favored Roland.

"Yes... No one treats witches as sincerely as him." Echo fully agreed with Iron Axe. "However, His Highness gave me really strange and irrelevant names to the mix performance methods, such as 'Electricity sound' and 'Agricultural heavy metal'." She shook her head with a smile. "I think only he could think up names like that."

Before Iron Axe could reply, she started to sing.

When the mixed melody reached his ears, he was shocked and immediately stood, frozen in place. What an amazing tune! It sounded like the sands had gently touched the oasis. It was like a bright fire plum bursting from the earth's depths.

At the moment, Iron Axe felt that he had been transported to the desert and was standing under the scorching sun. "Is this... an illusion?" He looked down and found that the snow had disappeared and he was now standing in an Oasis. When he looked into the distance, what he could see was only sand. The girl before him kept her eyes closed. Her song resounded through the air as she stood in the shallow water, disturbing its smooth surface. What a breathtaking beauty!

"Going through sand and dust

to seek the traces of the Oasis.

Your footprints were left in the sea of sand.

Your shadow was reflected in the spring.

Someday, the oases will become the new deserts

and the deserts will also breed new oases.

The only eternal thing

is the legend of you.

Someday

I'll follow your footprints

to find your shadow

at the sleepless and wordless moment

before dawn."

...

When the song faded out, Iron Axe was back at the snowy Longsong Stronghold. It seemed that nothing had happened and

that everything he had experienced just now was an illusion. He swallowed hard for a while and then opened his hand, there was a tiny grain of transparent sand shining on his palm.

光。

Chapter 458: The Song Of Resonance

Roland could not believe what he was hearing.

"You said that you saw a vast desert in Echo's song and you've brought back a grain of sand?" Roland asked. His mind was racing.

Was this simply an auditory delusion? How, then, could he explain this speck of powder?

"I didn't bring it back, Your Highness," Iron Axe put the grain of sand on the desk solemnly, "At the time, it rooted me in place and I never thought of checking whether it was real. This grain of sand just suddenly appeared in my hand. Maybe it was blown by the wind?"

It was becoming more and more implausible. Roland thought for a moment and asked, "Did she sing only the one song?"

"Some other songs, too. But I couldn't understand." Absorbed in his memory, Iron Axe continued, "It was like a miracle... Back in the Southernmost Region, if Lady Silvermoon claimed to be the Three Gods Emissary, I would firmly believe her. Your Highness, is it because she's evolved?"

This Ironsand man of the Mojin Clan had followed Roland more than a year and now had a much better understanding of witches.

"I think so, but it's the first time I've seen such a situation."

Roland answered. After some thought, he decided to send for Echo and ask her in person.

When Iron Axe left, Roland picked up the grain of sand and looked at it carefully, "Was it created by magic power?"

"I'm not sure," Nightingale's voice came from behind, "There's no trace of magic power in it."

This did not necessarily mean that it was not made by magic power. It was a real thing in the real world, like Soraya's pictures. Once created, it would maintain itself without magic power and could not be affected by God's Stone of Retaliation.

Before long, Echo came into the study. Nightingale immediately stepped out of her mist to stand beside Roland. With a smile on her face, she said, "Congratulations."

Echo was surprised, "To me?"

Nightingale nodded, "The magic power in you has cohered. Don't you feel it?"

"Re-really?" Echo shook her head in amazement, "You mean my ability has evolved?"

Finding that things had turned out just the way he'd expected, Roland asked Nightingale, "What does it look like?"

"It's like a transparent blue gem, clear as water," Nightingale answered, "She has almost as much magic power as Maggie."

Echo's evolution seemed to be unrelated to enlightenment. She had condensed her magic power even before she knew it. When Roland told her what Iron Axe had experienced, she was astonished.

"He actually felt like he had returned to the Southernmost Region and was in the sea of sand?"

"The phrase 'Felt like' may be inaccurate. He returned with a grain of sand from the dessert," Roland said with smile. "Sand can be found everywhere, but I don't believe he went so far as to dig in the snow or mud for it only to deceive me." He paused a little and asked, "What did you see at the time?"

"Nothing at all." Echo answered with some embarrassment, "I had my eyes closed and wasn't paying attention to my surroundings."

"So how about showing us?" Roland suggested. He propped his hands on his chin, with interest. "Sing the song you created, the one about your hometown."

"Here?"

"Yes," he said, "Dinner isn't ready for another half hour. It won't

disturb anyone."

"I want to hear an immersive song, too," Nightingale encouraged.

"Ah... fine."

Echo took a deep breath and soon a mixed sonata from a distant time resounded in the office. It was a sweet feminine voice, slightly restrained at the start. Maybe it was because she had never sung indoors. As the melody slowly soared, she became thoroughly absorbed in the music.

As she was singing, Roland could hear hot winds blowing through green woods; he even felt the temperature increase. He smelled searing sands under a scorching sun. As the song faded out, he lingered lost in the aftertaste. Undoubtedly, this was a wonderful, exotic lyrical song in which a tone-deaf guy like himself could never find fault. However, he'd seen neither desert nor oasis with trickling streams. He sat still in his study the whole time.

He glanced at Nightingale who shook her head. It was apparent that she had not seen any miraculous scene, either.

Was it because her ability was not effective this time?

Roland contemplated, and then asked Echo, "Did you write this song?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"Now, sing several songs I've taught you," he thought for a moment and decided, "Let everyone come and listen."

Soon, the study was crowded with witches. The three witches from Sleeping Island had even come, too. They were still holding their cards in hand. Echo was clearly a little nervous, but with the encouragement of Nightingale, she calmed down. She sang all the songs including the Guerillas' Song.

She received warm applause from the witches without exception.

After listening to the witches describe their feelings, Roland had a rough understanding of Echo's new ability.

The amount the audience could be affected by her singing depended on their respective experiences. If they had the same experience as depicted in the song, they would be influenced more. He came to this conclusion based on the newer songs he'd taught to Echo. Guerillas' Song was the most popular one, because the witches had seen the First Army marching along to the beat of music. Therefore, they could understand this song better. This could also explain why her Southernmost Region song had resonated so strongly with Iron Axe.

Unfortunately, Roland could not tell from a test that how much her singing could affect the audience. He was wondering if the scenes in her song could become real things when a listener was fully absorbed in it.

Echo's new ability filled him with expectations. The ability to lift one's spirits should never be underestimated. She could encourage soldiers, pacify the masses, and sing background music for dramas...

...

The next afternoon, Roland met Vader from Border Town in his study.

"Your... Your Highness... I... I'm here..." he said with chattered teeth. Obviously, he had not recovered from the high-speed flight.

The fastest way to travel between the town and Stronghold now was Maggie's express service. However, even wrapped up in a thick blanket, flying at a speed of 60 kilometers per hour under the claws of a large beast was not a comfortable flight.

"Good job," Roland patted the fat pigeon on his shoulder.

"Coo!", she proudly held her head up.

"I want you here to assist the Elk Family with training," he looked at Vader and said. "The situation here is different from that in Border Town but similar to that of Valencia. Here there are rats, refugees and violent criminals."

"You mean, you want me to train patrollers?" Vader asked. He had finally stopped shivering after warming himself by the

fireplace.

"No, I mean police." Roland explained his plan for taking severe measures against illegal and criminal activities. "The First Army will take care of it in the beginning, but public security work has to be handed over to the local police. The most important thing in training the police is to infuse them with the 'people's protector' concept."

"Treat the people warmly, like a spring breeze. And punish the criminals ruthlessly, like thunder," Vader repeated what Roland had said.

"Yes," the prince said with a smile, "I hope you can train them well."

Chapter 459: Snaketooth (Part 1)

During the Months of Demons, the streets and lanes in Stronghold were always desolate and the Rats here huddled themselves up, hiding in their respective evil territories. They were sharing the food that had been stored in the fall and waiting until a new prey emerged when it would warm up again.

This is the way it should've been.

"Shit, why do I have to struggle through the snowstorm to listen to some damned policy-preaching?" Snaketooth bitterly spat on the ground, "I don't give a damn what the lords will do."

"Put your collar up," he said to Joe, a small boy shivering next to him. "You'll die if you catch the cold-plague."

"He shouldn't have followed us out," Sunflower said, frowning. "Is it really necessary to send all the four of us just to get some information? Kanas must have it in for us."

"Save it, please. Even if he does, what can we do?" Tigerclaw, a strapping boy, said with disapproval. "He's our source for food." Though he sounded unconcerned, he still quickened his pace to walk in front of the other three kids. From then on, Snaketooth felt that the cold wind was diminishing considerably.

"Th-thanks," Joe whispered.

When it came to Kanas, every one of them was reluctant to say anything.

Rats had social ranks too. Kings were at the top and tails at the bottom. Different ranks had different places to stay. As for Kanas, he was neither a king nor a tail. He was the ruler of the Endless Lane in the Western Zone of the outer city. If he must be called something, he should be a waist or a belly. No matter what he was, Snaketooth and his friends had to respectfully call him boss whenever they met him.

There were six rulers like him in the Western Zone, but their boss, namely the king of the Western Zone, still remained unknown to Snaketooth.

Kanas had several teams of Rats and they were one of them. The only way to win more favor from the ruler was to show stronger competency than the other teams. Unfortunately, as street kids in the lane, they were obviously at a disadvantage in both number and strength. But Tigerclaw was different—it was incredible for him, who ate only half a piece of brown bread every day, to be so well-built.

The reason the brown-haired girl, Sunflower, thought that Kanas was aiming at them was because of their prior mishap. They didn't take the witch that appeared in the lane to Kanas because Snaketooth wanted to use her ability to make some money first. Not long after they went out, they unexpectedly met the big shot from the Honeysuckle Family and lost the witch before they made enough money.

Because of this incident, Kanas was extremely angry with them. He thought if they had given the witch to him earlier, he would have made a lot more by selling her to the noble or the church.

"It's easy to say," Snaketooth said with contempt. "Selling her to the church for 25 gold royals? Where can he find those priests? The church is in ruins. The nobles won't honestly give gold royals to a Rat, either. He'll get killed instead of getting paid."

"Snaketooth is, is right." Joe agreed, still shivering. "If he really thought we made him lose 25 gold royals, he would have thrown us into the Redwater River."

"Kanas could only give the witch to the king of the Western Zone. He also needs to protect himself from her magic power and doesn't have any God's Stones of Retaliation." Snaketooth continued, "He's just disgusted with us."

"Stop saying 'selling'. She's Paper and one of us!" Sunflower gave Snaketooth a painful pinch. "You talk about her like she's cargo!" She suddenly paused a little here and asked, "Hey, did you sell her back then?"

"No, I didn't!" He exclaimed. "I tried my best to save her, but that person is the lord of the city."

"Is she alright in Border Town?" Tigerclaw sighed.

"How can she be alright?" Sunflower snorted. "What's the

difference between being played by the prince and being played by the other noblemen?"

"Really... you say that now, but when you actually see the noble's lifestyle, you'll desperately want to be played by them," Snaketooth said and twitched his lips.

When they arrived at the square of Stronghold, they were taken by surprise. Several hundred people there surrounded a wooden stage and there was a bonfire. It was such a rare scene on a snowy day.

"Someone will actually come here to preach," Tigerclaw rasped. "What kind of tricks does the noble want to play?"

"It can't be good news." Snaketooth shrugged. "I suppose it's about tax collection or grabbing some able-bodied guys for military service. They've just fought a battle, right?"

"Whatever, it's none of our business." Sunflower said, "Let's finish this quickly and get home early. Joe, go over to the bonfire and warm yourself."

"Ye-yeah."

Snaketooth walked around the crowd to the edge of the stage. The man on it wore a thick, cotton-padded jacket, a wool hood, and a pair of deer-leather gloves. Snaketooth felt warm simply by looking at him. This was so much better than him and his dirty,

old clothes. He thought of how great it would be if he had a chance to steal them, but also knew that was just in his imagination. The Elk Family label on the man's cloak indicated his identity.

A Rat could never afford to offend an attendant of the four families.

"Go with Joe to warm yourselves, I can take care of this here," Snaketooth said to the other two kids.

"Really?" Tigerclaw asked and raised his eyebrow a little.

"Of course, I've got a good memory." Snaketooth pointed at his head. "I remember everything—the words, the people, and the bitter hatred."

"Pfft," Sunflower scoffed. "Listen to you. Since you say so, I'll go. And thanks... Let's go, Tigerclaw."

"But you'll have to give me more at dinner tonight."

"We'll see. I don't know if there's any food tonight!" she said, throwing her hands up.

After they left, Snaketooth patted his cold face to draw his attention back to the wooden stage. The information was useless for a Rat tail like himself, but it might mean profitable opportunities for Rat bellies and kings. Unfortunately, even if they did make some profits, the tails at the bottom would still get

almost nothing.

"My fellow citizens, here's a joint declaration by the lord of the Western Region, Prince Roland Wimbledon; Earl of the Elk Family, Shalafi Hull; and the lord of Longsong Stronghold, Petrov Hull." The man took a sip of his hot ale and continued to read a piece of parchment in his hand. "The City Hall of Longsong Stronghold now opens the grain market to the public. Any citizen who has extra grain at home can sell them in the market freely now. But pay attention please, starting next month, any unauthorized sale of grain will be considered a felony, and only the City Hall has the right to purchase and sell grain! Once someone is arrested for the unauthorized sale of grain, he'll be severely punished! The City Hall also welcomes public tip-offs about this kind of offense, and will reward anyone who offers correct information 25 silver royals!"

Snaketooth opened his mouth with surprise, for he never expected that he would hear such incredible news!

The noble wants to forbid the private trade of grain!

Besides, both the grain purchasing and selling prices offered by the City Hall are extremely low. Who'll sell grain to them at this low price? The grain price in Stronghold has already increased threefold because of the early arrival of this year's Months of Demons and it's impossible to drop before the snow ends. If the City Hall sells grain now, no matter how much, the nobles and merchants will buy it all. Did the prince and the city lord never think of this issue?

"Wait... if they really do forbid private trade in grain, what will happen to us?" Snaketooth suddenly shuddered at this thought. Most of the citizens bought most of their grain from Rats. Once the policy was carried out and all the grain in the market was bought by the noble and merchants, it would be a disaster for almost everyone!

Chapter 460: Snaketooth (Part 2)

Snaketooth never expected that much more unbelievable things were yet to come—the speaker's next announcement rendered him motionless.

"In five days, which is the second week of the first month of spring, the City Hall will distribute rations at the square! Everyone can come here to collect two bowls of steaming hot oatmeal, one for lunch and one for dinner. Citizens, let's all thank the prince for his generosity!"

At this, the crowd began to stir.

"My god, Gayle was right—this was really in the notice!"

"Yes, I came just to confirm that."

"Do my ears deceive me? Free oatmeal every day?"

"Are you coming, too? Don't you have plenty of oats and dried meat at home?"

"It's still two free meals! My lord didn't forbid me from coming. Didn't you hear that he said 'everyone'?"

"My Lord!" Someone suddenly shouted. "Is the oatmeal really free? How long will this continue?"

This was the question on everyone's mind. The crowd quieted and turned to look at the attendant in unison.

The attendant waited for the good news to sink in, and then announced calmly, "That's right! The oatmeal really is free, and the distribution will continue until the end of the Months of Demons! Tell all your neighbors and friends about this news, because His Highness will always stay true to his promises!"

Hundreds of people instantly became excited, but Snaketooth still couldn't believe his ears.

"Free food? What does this mean? It means that they can temporarily avoid being threatened by Kanas and starving in the snow—No, not just them, but all Rats will be able to easily obtain food. Now, they'll be even more difficult to control!"

Kanas won't just sit by and let this happen, so what will he do? Send someone to disperse the crowd, disrupt the distribution... or bribe City Hall officials to dump all the oatmeal into the Redwater River?"

However, Snaketooth also noticed that the announcer kept mentioning "His Highness", which meant it was the legendary Prince Roland that gave orders to distribute rations, not the Duke or the Five Families. "Will he let these Rats roam shamelessly, or will he really be different from the other noblemen?"

He didn't trust any of the noble, and the day Paper was taken

away was still fresh in his mind.

However, a small voice in his head kept asking him, "What if it was true, what if... it was true?"

Luckily, his doubts didn't last long because the Elk attendant on the stage began to read another notice—he used to think that these orders were simply the nobles' tricks to mess with the citizens and had nothing to do with orphans like him, but even more surprising than the last two notices was the third one, which directly applied to the Rats.

"Citizens, listen up! There are brighter days to come!" The announcer shouted something to calm the rowdy crowd and then said, "In five days, or when the oatmeal distribution starts, His Highness will begin cracking down on crime in Longsong Stronghold, including Black Street organizations, theft, and any behavior that threatens the safety and belongings of the citizens! When the time came, please don't hang around Black Street or visit pubs, casinos, and other unsafe areas to prevent unnecessary harm!"

"Order in Stronghold needs to be maintained by all citizens, and the City Hall is currently recruiting public safety officers and police personnel. Next, I'll explain the requirements!"

Snaketooth didn't feel like listening anymore, so he made his way out of the crowd and ran next to the bonfire. "Hurry, let's go back!"

"Are you done listening?" Sunflower rubbed her hands and asked

reluctantly, "You should get warm before you leave."

"No, we have to go now!" he said urgently.

"What happened?" Joe could sense that something was off.

"I'll explain to you on the road." Snaketooth stomped his foot.
"We need to go back right now, otherwise Kanas will hear about
this through someone else and we'll be done for!"

...

The gathering spot for Rats in the Western Zone was a two-story house buried deep in the Endless Lane.

Kanas was an intimidating one-eyed man, and his temper and methods were just as cruel as his appearance. Snaketooth personally saw him nail someone who was messed up to a wall and then whipped him to death. At the same time, he controlled the food supply of several Rat organizations in the area, so no one dared to disrespect him.

Snaketooth felt the same way, so he knelt carefully in front of Kanas and told him about the notices.

"Is the lord of the city targeting us?" Kanas asked with a frown,
"What kind of nonsense is that?"

"...It's not the lord of the city," reminded Snaketooth carefully. "The announcer was talking about the prince."

"What the hell do you know?" Kanas spat. "No noble, no matter how important, can do anything in someone else's territory. This's Longsong Stronghold, not Border Town or King's City, and the lords of the Honeysuckles or Elks are here, so there's nothing he can do. So what if he's the so-called protector of the Western Region? Just look at who's sitting in the castle. The king still rules Graycastle in name, but who cares about his orders?"

"You're right," a girl next to Kanas said softly. "Not to mention, even if power changes hands, it has nothing to do with us. Nobles are Nobles, and Rats are Rats. Just because the two groups live in the same city, it doesn't mean that they are anything alike."

"Rats are Rats? That's what I love to hear." Kanas grabbed the girl's behind. "However, the second notice is quite strange. Usually, if the noble want to improve their reputation by distributing food, they would let us know beforehand. Also, they usually restrict the amount they distribute, but how come it sounds like they're trying to feed the entire city this time?"

No one could answer his question, but Snaketooth knew that everyone was thinking about those two free bowls of oatmeal.

"Maybe... the noblemen want to get on good terms with Sir Bloodyhand?" The girl chuckled.

"Who knows." Kanas shrugged. "I'll go ask the boss later. Only he

knows and understands these issues related to the noble."

The so-called "Bloodyhand" was the king of the Western Zone Rats, and it was rumored that he was very close with the lower-level nobles. In a sense, he was no longer a regular Rat, but a title-less "underground nobleman"—in fact, all Rat kings had similar social connections.

At this thought, Snaketooth breathed a sigh of relief. He knew that Kanas' lover was right. "Both the noble and Rats have existed for hundreds of years, so no matter how the upper level changes, the underground world will always maintain its own rules... His Highness is also a member of the noble, so what can he do?"

"By the way, I know exactly what you all are thinking right now." Kanas chuckled. "You want to try the City Hall's oatmeal? On the day of distribution, everyone must remain in this room, and no one can leave. Understood? If anyone goes behind my back to eat it, I'll make sure he never eats another thing in his life!"

Chapter 461: Respective Beliefs

It was the strangest group of people Rene Medde had ever seen.

A detailed map of Longsong Stronghold was spread open on the square table in the lobby on the castle's first floor.

Six people surrounded the table, including Commander of the First Army Iron Axe, Police Chief of Border Town Vader, the current leader of Ragingfire Crack, head of Security Bureau Nightingale, dark-haired witch Ashes, and Earl of the Elk Family himself.

Rene never expected that he would need the help of Rats one day, let alone cooperate with witches.

"My lords, there're about seven or eight different gangs in Stronghold," Crack said, bowing and smiling ingratiatingly. "Sickle Gang, situated in the northern outer city, is the largest group with 500 to 600 members, but Knell Gang, in the inner city, is the most powerful. Knell consists mostly of escaped convicts and mercenaries and rarely accepts commoners as its members, and they have more than enough swords and armor, which is why they control the most lucrative area."

"The eastern city belongs to Dead Flesh Eaters and Vulture Gang, who sell slaves and Dreamland Water through the harbor area through extremely cruel means. It's rumored that these two Rat organizations are backed by the Wolf and Maple Leaf families, but when our Ragingfire totally defeated them a couple years ago, no

great nobles stepped up to help them." He said with a tinge of pride.

"As for the western city, the gangs are much more complicated... Since they are all small gangs, I've only interacted with their leaders. They are..."

"Information about gangs isn't important, so you don't have to go into details." The tall Mojin man interrupted. "I only want to know if you can take us into the lairs of these underground Rats?"

"Ahem, my lord..." Crack nodded towards him. "A common saying goes, 'The lairs of Rats are riddled with caves and holes'. I know the main gathering points of all the gangs, but I don't know every single one of their shelters, especially the hiding places in dried wells and basements, so I can only rely on leaders and cronies to find the specific spots."

"He's right about that." Rene sighed. "If we went face to face with the Rats, they wouldn't stand a chance, but it'll be much more difficult to clear them all out."

"We might have a chance of success if we launch a surprise attack, but now that the notice has been announced, the leaders will all hide away by the time we act."

"Hide?" The dark-haired witch laughed. "Unless they hide in Redwater City, if they'll have to stay in Stronghold, there's no way we won't find them here."

"Yes, you're right." Crack wiped the sweat off his forehead and didn't argue further.

The witch named Ashes gave off a terrifying feeling of pressure. Rene had been in battle and fought demonic beasts in Hermes, so he knew what a true warrior should be like... But even soldiers in the Judgement Army, who had faced hundreds of battles, would falter in front of her. She didn't need to make some scary expression because even when she was simply standing, no one could dare to look into her eyes.

There was no doubt that she had not only seen blood and slain enemies but also hovered between life and death. That was why she had such a menacing aura.

"His Highness has given us three days to prepare. When the first batch of rations is distributed, the army will begin from the western city gate and clean up the Rat gangs in all the areas." Iron Axe said quietly, "This mission is targeting only the organizers so that we can take down the Black Street as quickly as possible."

"But... will this really work?" Rene couldn't help asking as Iron Axe walked towards the entrance of the lobby. "No city has been able to get rid of the Rats. As long as the citizens exist, so will they."

Iron Axe turned around and glanced at him. "Is that so? Border Town doesn't have any Rats."

...

Everyone left, and only Vader was left.

"Earl, has anyone applied to be a policeman yet?"

"Not yet... but I heard from Petrov that dozens of people in the Second Army have signed up for it." Rene sat down slowly next to the table with Iron Axe's words still ringing in his ears. After a while, he whispered, "Are there really no Rats in the town?"

"If you mean the conventional Black Street organizations, then there aren't any." Vader shrugged. "No man or woman has to worry about food or shelter, and everyone can find a suitable job. Even the salary from doing odd jobs is enough to feed themselves. Honestly, before I went to Border Town, I didn't believe that a place like that could exist in the Kingdom of Graycastle either."

"Why?" Rene couldn't help asking.

"I don't know, my lord..." Vader splayed his hands. "His Highness Roland is capable of things that are far beyond any other noblemen I have known."

"No need to call me lord." Rene waved his hand. "His Highness wants us to work together, so we can put our titles aside for now."

Vader nodded and didn't protest. Rene admired Vader's frankness. "Do you think the prince can really eliminate all the Rats in Stronghold and purify the entire Western Region?"

"I'm not sure either." Vader's answer surprised him. "After all, I used to be a Patrol Leader and interacted with Rats for many years. Their existence was like the shadows under the sun, so blunt force might not be that effective. His Highness once said that if he was dealing with a large city with millions of people, he might not be able to take care of everything. But if there were only ten thousand people, he might be able to get rid of these bottom-feeding scums. Basically, he plans to make people realize that it's too risky to become a Rat and there're many other better options."

"Too... risky?" Rene ignored the statement about millions of people because even a city with ten thousand people was already unbelievable. "This will take a pretty long time to achieve."

"That's right, targeting Rats or crime can't be done in one day," Vader said and nodded. "That's why His Highness Roland established the police force. I told you before that this organization is completely different from a patrol team."

It was really different. They reported to the City Hall rather than the noble and maintained order in an area rather than conspire with criminals.

"And most importantly, His Highness told me one more thing."

"What did he tell you?"

"I actually had the same concerns as you do now," Vader said with a smile, "but His Highness asked, 'So you won't try because

it's hard?'"

Rene Medde felt a sense of realization rush into his heart. If he did not try because it was hard, he would not have been relentlessly pursuing his knighthood. Although he inherited the title of Earl and felt like he was straying from his desired life, as long as he could continue to fight for the people, he would be still following the path in his heart. Now, this path was becoming even wider.

"Now... I understand." He took a deep breath.

"I was just as shocked as you." Vader recalled. "But I don't understand what His Highness said next."

"Did he say anything else?" Rene asked excitedly.

"Uh-huh," Vader said, stroking his chin. "he said 'you'll feel incredibly fulfilled after drinking this bowl of chicken broth.' But... what does it have to do with chicken broth?"

Chapter 462: The Determination

Joe fell ill.

He was the second weakest in the group before Paper was kidnapped, and since then he had become the weakest. Joe was fine the night he came back from the square. But the next day, Snaketooth found him lying motionless on the hay, moaning vaguely and with bright red cheeks.

"He was infected by the cold plague," Sunflower said while touching Joe's head, "and his head is burning hot."

"Will I... die?"

Joe, squinting his eyes, asked softly.

No one answered.

The cold plague was an extremely stubborn disease, and once contracted, you can only rely on the body to resist the infection. However, people who were physically fit seldom suffered from the cold—those who were infected were generally weak, so very few patients could survive it. It was essentially a death sentence for Rats.

"I'll go and look for Kanas," said Snaketooth, breaking the silence.

"What do you want him for?"

"To beg him to give Joe more food." He stood up. "I've heard that the chance of survival is greater if the patient is kept warm and adequately fed."

"He won't give you any food," Tigerclaw shook his head and said. "We all know what kind of person he is."

"Exactly, you may even get beaten up by him," Sunflower said while gathering hay. "Rats never feed any useless person."

"Joe isn't useless." Snaketooth retorted. "He can read!"

"Just a few words, and of what use is that to Kanas? He wants people who can steal and rob others."

"..." Snaketooth clenched his teeth, turned around and walked towards the manager's room in the Endless Lane. He had to try even if he would be beaten up by Kanas with a stick.

Surprisingly, Kanas was not back yet.

"You're lucky." When he brought the message back to his companions, Tigerclaw grinned. "Or we may have to take care of another one."

Sunflower sighed. "Each of us will give a portion of our bread to

Joe later when it's time for the bread distribution so that he can eat more."

However, Snaketooth did not feel lucky at all. He could feel something was not right.

"It'd only take half an hour to send the message to Bloodyhand. It's understandable that Bloodyhand didn't come back last night due to the discussion of countermeasures—but it's already noon, the discussion should have been finished by now." Furthermore, when his men opened the door, he took a peek and realized Kanas and his lover were both missing.

The gang started to distribute food not long after, and Snaketooth realized that it was distributed by Kanas' confidant.

What he received was nothing but half a slice of brown bread.

...

After four days, Joe's condition was still deteriorating.

He was yelling that he felt cold yesterday, but he couldn't speak a word today. His once pink cheeks started to turn pale and his breathing was getting weaker.

"We've tried our best," Sunflower said languidly with her hand on her stomach.

They had given half of their food to Joe in the past few days. If it was not for them, he might not have lived this long. Tigerclaw, who used to be very energetic, was starting to look feeble as well.

Kanas had not shown up these past few days.

More than a hundred Rats gathered in the room and started to discuss this matter. But it was just a discussion—after all, they were still getting food as usual. However, it was especially noisy today.

It was the day of free food distribution, as announced.

"I'll go to the square," after a long contemplation, Snaketooth clenched his teeth and said. "We need to eat more than just bread. Joe might be able to last if I could get a bowl of hot oatmeal for him."

"Are you crazy?" Sunflower stared at him and said, "Don't forget how Kanas warned us. Do you really want to get stitches on your lips?"

"That's if he knows I snuck out. We don't even know where Kanas is now. What if the lord of the city is really going to attack them?"

"But his men are still here. Do you think they'll let you off if they find out?" Sunflower looked at Tigerclaw. "Don't just stand there.

Help me to talk him out of this."

"I'll go with you," the latter said suddenly.

"Both of you..."

"This food distribution may have already been ruined. Or perhaps there's no food at all, and it's simply the noble's act of disguising it. I suppose it shouldn't be considered disobeying Kanas' warnings in this case?" Tigerclaw twitched his lips and said, "I'm strong—I can run there and back while carrying Joe on my back, and it won't take us too long. Kanas isn't around now and his confidants are hiding in his room roasting themselves in front of the fire. No one will notice us."

"Um..." Sunflower hesitated.

"You just stay here," Snaketooth said, "so you can cover for us in case anyone asks. Just say we have diarrhea and had to go to find a sheltered place to relieve ourselves. No worries. We won't need long to rush back from there."

"Well, then," she looked around and said, "hurry up!"

...

Snaketooth and Tigerclaw snuck out of the log cabin, running all the way down the alley. The elevated snow under their feet drenched their trousers. Even though the cold wind that blew into

their face felt as sharp as a knife, it couldn't stop them. Panting while arriving at the square, they found that there were almost a thousand people surrounding the podium.

Oatmeal really was being distributed!

Both of them ran over quickly, but were stopped by two guards in brown uniforms. "Walk slowly, no pushing, and no cutting in line —otherwise you'll be prohibited from receiving any free food."

Snaketooth noticed that there was a wooden fence set up around the center of the podium. The crowd was moving along the fence in a line like a folded dragon. Guards armed with strange iron bars could be seen at every short interval. They looked like the defenders of order, because people were expelled from the line from time to time.

"My friend is sick... Can you help us, please? I'm begging you!" Snaketooth knelt down on the snowy ground.

"He's been starving for days. He's in need of food urgently!" Tigerclaw knelt down beside him.

"What kind of illness?"

"It's... the cold plague."

One of them reached out to Joe who was unconscious and said, "Leave him with me. Both of you get in line."

"Erm..."

"He knows the way back, doesn't he?" the other guard said, "Even if he doesn't know, you can always come back here to look for him."

While saying this, the guard walked away with Joe on his shoulders.

"What should we do?" Both of them stared at each other. No one expected it to turn out like this—according to their plans, the other party would either be totally indifferent or let them bypass the fence to get the oatmeal in advance.

"Let's go back first." Snaketooth decided after some short contemplation.

"What... Go back?" Tigerclaw asked with surprise, "No oatmeal?"

"It'll take us at least half an hour to get there with this line. There might be trouble if we take too long," he nodded and said. "We can sneak out again in the evening to bring Joe back."

Tigerclaw looked at the oatmeal on the wooden table and said reluctantly, "Okay... then."

There was something that Snaketooth kept to himself—since the

announcement of the free food distribution had come true, did it mean that the other two rumors would eventually pan out as well?

He vaguely felt that an upheaval might be coming towards the Black Street.

Back at the Endless Lane, both of them tiptoed into the house but were caught by surprise.

Sunflower was hung in front of the entrance with both her hands tied behind her back, standing on a shaky wooden bench. Bruises could be seen on her face. All the while, Kanas' men were standing by her side, sneering at both of them.

"You, finally back with a well-fed stomach?"

Chapter 463: The Elimination Of Bloodyhand Gang

Snaketooth's heart sank rapidly.

"Let...go..." Fear seized his throat. He opened his mouth but could only rasp in a dull voice.

"You mean 'let go of her'? Alright." The man kicked the stool below Sunflower's feet, her body stiffened instantly. The rope dug into Sunflower's neck. She kicked her feet in panic, clenched and released her tied hands, but none of these helped.

Tigerclaw rushed forward to help, but his head was struck from behind with a stick and he fell to the floor.

"If we hadn't been waiting for you, I'd have killed her earlier." One of Kanas' henchmen sneered. "What a good excuse, diarrhea! You probably don't know, but we've had people watching you. He knows that mutts aren't disciplined. We knew we'd have to teach you a lesson to ensure you abide by the rules of the Bloodyhand Gang."

"It's my fault." Snaketooth knelt down. "Please let her go! She never even stepped out of this room!"

"This little b*tch lied to me," the henchman shrugged. "She swore you were just looking for shelter from the wind. Even with her two teeth knocked out, she wouldn't change her story. Why would I

want her alive? So she can get back at me?"

"They want to kill us." Snaketooth came to the sudden realization. He struggled to raise his head, seeing that Sunflower's struggle was getting weaker and her body had begun to stiffen. He forced himself not to look at her, but instead paying attention to the dagger hanging at the waist of the man. He was only six steps away. If Snaketooth could rush up and get that dagger...

Suddenly, the rope broke.

Sunflower fell to the floor silently.

"What the hell..." The henchman frowned, but before he could finish his words, a line of blood spouted from his neck, spraying the face of the closest Rat.

Snaketooth stared at the scene in front of him.

Meanwhile, sounds of a fight came from the outer room.

"Stop! This is the Bloodyhand Gang's territory!"

"Some... somebody broke in!"

"Oh... my hand!"

"Damn it. Come out and kill her!"

"Mon... monster! Help..."

Kanas' followers looked at each other and pulled out their weapons. Before they could escape, an apparition flew in and overthrew the two front men.

Snaketooth then saw the attacker—a striking woman with black hair casually tied into a ponytail at the back of her head. She was wearing a long black gown and her eyes were golden. Snaketooth felt his blood freeze when she cast a glance at him.

"Drop your weapon, put your hands over your head and kneel down. If you want to live." The woman stuck out three fingers. "I will count to three. Anyone who doesn't follow my instruction will die."

"Three."

There were only a few seconds of silence before someone shouted, "God, such skills... she must be worth 100 gold royals!"

"Everybody, let's move!"

"Catch her and boss will definitely reward us well!"

"Catch her alive!"

"Never mind. You'd be better dead." She held up a giant, oddly-shaped ornate sword and charged into the crowd. Snaketooth couldn't believe his eyes. The sword was made of cast iron, and whatever it touched shattered instantly. She moved at such a fast speed that her enemies' lime powder and crossbows were barely useful. The once effective hidden weapons couldn't hit the target now. The crowd could not escape from her, let alone fight back.

"Protect your friend, child," a voice came but the source of the voice was nowhere to be seen.

He swallowed his saliva and crawled to Sunflower's side in panic. He put his hand to her nostrils to feel her breath.

She faintly exhaled warm air... she was still alive!

Snaketooth felt like crying, the happiness of having survived overwhelmed him.

What was written on the announcement was real. These people had been sent by the prince to eliminate organizers of the gang! Now they had hope!

Bending over Sunflower, he burst into tears.

...

As more soldiers in brown uniforms rushed into the room, the fight ended quickly.

All the conscious Rats were told to stand in a line and walkout of the room one by one.

"My head aches," Tigerclaw complained with one hand rubbing his head. "The bump is so big."

"Be grateful you weren't beaten to death." Snaketooth glared at him with tears in his eyes.

"What happened?" Sunflower massaged her neck on which appeared a black line from the rope. "I thought I was dead for sure."

"I'll tell you after we get out of here," Snaketooth shook his head. He was afraid if he spoke too much, he would burst into tears again.

"Your turn." The guard at the door twisted Snaketooth's arms to his back.

Snaketooth didn't resist, and he followed the guard outside. A woman in a white gown was standing in the yard, a paradox to the lethal goddess in black. Her face was covered by a hood, with only strands of curly blonde hair showing.

"You may leave after answering the Lord's questions."

"Yes," Snaketooth faithfully replied, he was in awe of this army's capabilities.

"Have you committed murder?" Her voice was brisk and pleasing as if it was from another world. "How about rape? Robbery?"

Suddenly something struck his mind—she was the one who had warned him without showing herself.

"None of those."

"Alright." She nodded. "Wait at the square for your dinner from His Highness."

Snaketooth stopped after two steps. It took courage to ask, "Are you a witch?"

"That's right." Snaketooth hadn't expected an answer, but to his surprise, the witch gave an upfront reply.

"These are Kanas's followers," Snaketooth continued to speak, biting his lip. "He hasn't been here for four days. He must be hiding somewhere with Bloodyhand! Bloodyhand is the real head of the gang! Never let him go!"

"Don't worry. They can't escape." The woman smiled and said this with a tone of unquestionable confidence.

...

"Do you mean... His Highness sent witches to hunt for the head of Rats?" Tigerclaw's eyes were wide in disbelief.

"Not only witches but also many common men," Snaketooth told the bizarre story he had just witnessed. "What I've guessed is right—witches are accepted in His Highness' territory. They can appear in public without worries, and even fight with others." He paused, and then continued to speak with excitement, "If Paper really was sent there, she must be living a fairly decent life."

"Sounds like you want to go there and meet her," Sunflower said, twitching her mouth. "Witches are talented and it's difficult to see them. You might embarrass her if you go to see her."

"Oh..." Snaketooth was stunned for a moment. He knew what Sunflower said was true. He was only a Rat, even if he could survive the winter, his identity would remain the same. Paper must be living a whole different life now, totally out of his league.

"Don't overthink it." Tigerclaw patted him on the shoulder. "Look, it's time to eat."

Chapter 464: The Changes

Many people came for the second meal. Luckily, the three of them had arrived early and were able to secure a position at the front.

When Snaketooth joined the queue, he realized why the fences were built around the wooden stage. There was a speaker chattering about the new policy. He would probably have to keep listening to him until he got his oatmeal.

The crowd moved forward slowly. After waiting for half an hour, he finally reached the back of the wooden stage.

"Give me your right hand." A guard said.

Snaketooth followed the instruction, and the guard stamped the back of his hand.

"Next."

The wooden fence extended on both sides to encircle a large area, but the queuing still continued. Everyone was guided by a guard to take a wooden bowl, receive the oatmeal, go and eat on the side, and then return their bowl. It was hard to believe that ordinary civilians and Rats could be this orderly.

Snaketooth looked at the long queue behind him and felt that this whole thing was absurd. It was as if they were in a solemn

ceremony instead of begging for charity.

"What did he stamp on our hands?" Tigerclaw stuck his head out from behind. "I can't wipe it off."

"It's probably meant to prevent us from joining the queue again after we finish our oatmeal," he said with a frown.

Tall tents were set at the perimeter of the empty space, and he could see through the shadows that there were many busy people inside. Heavy wooden barrels were being moved to the long wooden table beside the fence, and it was obvious that the food had just been cooked. As he watched the steaming porridge flow into his bowl, his hands could not help but tremble.

How long had it been since he had a hot meal?

The oatmeal was watery and did not come with vegetables or condiments, but just the golden porridge and its overflowing aroma was enough to make him salivate. Compared with black bread, which contained stones and husks, the food in his bowl made him feel warm again.

Tears were starting to collect in his eyes again.

Snaketooth finished the oatmeal quickly despite how hot it was and licked the bowl clean. Although he wished he could go back and beg for another bowl, he finally dispelled the idea after he saw the surveillance guards. He put the wooden bowl into the

designated pot and followed the crowd to exit the fenced area.

There was another wooden stage at the exit, and the speaker was answering questions from the public enthusiastically.

After eating some warm food, the howling wind did not seem as cold as before, and the three of them slowly followed the crowd to the wooden stage.

"You asked why His Royal Highness distributed the oatmeal? That's a good question!" the man said excitedly. "It's because His Highness is determined to eliminate the Rats. Those who are menaced by Rats and those who are forced to comply with the Rats for food can be completely liberated and no longer subject to their threats! At the same time, he did this so that the families that don't have enough food storage can survive the harsh times! This is His Highness' benevolence!"

"You said earlier that the oatmeal would only be provided till the end of Months of Demons, so what happens after that?" someone asked loudly.

The scene suddenly quieted as the people eagerly awaited the answer. Snaketooth also listened attentively.

"It's simple! You can support yourselves!" the speaker said with a smile.

"Support...ourselves?"

"But I don't know how to farm."

"Could you please explain, sir?"

"Don't worry, let me explain to you slowly!" He waved his hand. "After the Months of Demons, Longsong Stronghold and Border Town will merge to form a new city, so the empty areas in between will require a lot of you to reclaim and reconstruct! Only hard work can create wealth, and only hard work can change destiny! You'll have a stable salary, and the money you earn will support you and your family! At the same time, His Highness promised that those who officially have a job will be accepted as citizens of the new city."

His words stirred a wave in the crowd, and Snaketooth felt his heartbeat speed up.

"Yes, I know what you are thinking," said the speaker loudly. "Many of you are Rats, or citizens forced to become Rats. It doesn't matter. You can work for a new life. You no longer have to live in the dark underground, and you don't have to worry about being sent to the gallows. You can rely on your own hands to earn legitimate rewards, whether it's food, clothing, or even shelter!"

"Sir... do we only need to be willing to work?"

He smiled and nodded. "In the future, His Highness will need more than 10,000 people, so... yes, as long as you are willing to work."

Snaketooth suddenly understood something.

...

During the next few days, the three of them went to the Central Square for oatmeal at noon every day. More and more citizens heard the news and came to the distributions, until they occupied almost half of the square. Of course, some people didn't go for the food. They just wanted to witness the end of the Black Street Rats.

It looked like there was a festival going on in Stronghold every day.

After the oatmeal was done being distributed at noon, there would be trials and executions on the other end of the square.

As the woman in the white robe had said, none of the Rats could escape their arrest. Snaketooth saw Kanas in one of the trials. His face was pale as he knelt and trembled on the scaffold, no longer domineering like before.

Then, as the iron pipe roared, his head was smashed into pieces.

Apart from Kanas, Snaketooth also heard the names of many other big figures among the Rats.

These included Bloodyhand, Ironcrow, Ripper... they had all

been fierce kings in Black Street. Their appearances were not much better than Kanas. Every death of a Rat king was met with warm cheers and chants of "Long live His Highness".

On the fourth day, Snaketooth saw Joe, looking completely recovered. The four of them hugged each other excitedly.

"Where have you been?"

"I don't know," Joe shook his head. "My mind was obscured at the time. When I woke up I was lying in a tent, and my head didn't hurt anymore. I only ate and slept until the fever came down. There were quite a few patients like me in there, drinking oatmeal with dried meat. I ate so much the first time that I almost swallowed my tongue."

"Is there such a good thing?" Tigerclaw stared and said, "Damn, I want to be infected with the cold plague!"

"Anyway, it's good you survived," Sunflower said gladly.

After everyone was done catching up, Snaketooth suddenly said, "I want to look for a job after the Months of Demons."

"Perhaps those nobilities are just fooling us, and there'll be additional requirements," Tigerclaw said. "When they recruited the new Second Army and police members, they asked for a fixed address and a clean record, which means no stealing. So we aren't even in their consideration."

Snaketooth shook his head and did not answer. The things in the bulletin were gradually becoming a reality, and he realized that the "new city" was possibly beyond his imagination. In these few yet long days, he had already felt a change.

If the speaker was telling the truth, would he be able to stay in the new city? If he could get rid of his Rat identity, would Paper feel less embarrassed if he saw her again?

Chapter 465: Inner Peace And Disturbance

Wendy, Scroll, and Spear were sitting in the castle hall, enjoying the top-grade black tea that was imported from the City of Glow.

Wendy took the whistling kettle off the pot hook in the fireplace and poured the boiled well water into a tea cup. Watching the water surface gradually being dyed a transparent orange and sniffing the mellow aroma that came from the rising steam, she felt her whole body become lazy. After blowing on the cup to cool down the tea, she took a small sip. The initial taste was slightly bitter, but it slowly turned into a fresh and sweet taste that rejuvenated her lips and tongue. As the warm liquid flowed into her abdomen, she uncontrollably let out a satisfied groan.

On the other side of the hall, Paper was still fiddling with the Sigil of God's Will. She had already mastered the skill of injecting magic power into the sigil, and was also able to accurately control the output of magic power. But no matter how she tried, she was only able to light up the first magic stone on the sigil.

"Whenever I see her, I'll think of the days in the Witch Cooperation Association," Scroll said emotionally. "At that time, nobody thought that we would all be able to live a life like what we have today."

"If we were able to foresee the future, Cara wouldn't have persisted so stubbornly." Wendy placed her cup down. "It's good that in the future, our awakened sisters won't have to experience the same suffering as we did." As she spoke, she started laughing. "We're probably the last batch of witches who had to suffer."

"Also the oldest batch, which means we'll enjoy the least number of good days," Scroll added while placing her hand on her forehead. "Sounds like we got the worst lot."

"That's why you came back early today just to enjoy a bit more leisure time?" Wendy joked.

"I left only after completing my duties." The latter shrugged her shoulders. "His Highness Roland is away and thus the amount of work is much less than usual. I'm somewhat not used to it."

"Is that so?" Wendy raised her eyebrows. "When His Highness returns, I'll tell him what you said word-for-word."

"Oh... then, for the next exam, I can't promise that you'll be able to understand every question."

"You two have such a great relationship." Spear giggled as she listened to the conversation. "Although I'm not young anymore, I've never enjoyed such a deep relationship with anyone. You two are among the most fortunate of the witches."

"That goes without saying. Not every witch has a powerful father," Scroll said, and drank a mouthful of tea before continuing, "and he would pass on everything he has to his daughter—even in the noble, such people are rare."

"By the way, how's it going in the City Hall?" Wendy looked

towards Spear. "I've heard that you'll go there whenever you're free recently."

"There're many benefits of going." Spear exhaled deeply. "This's the first time I've gained insight into a departmental management style that's so well-ordered and demarcated, yet allows the departments to work closely together. Instead of having the ministers of each department conduct their own employee recruitment and compensation, the City Hall takes care of it for them. This way, there's less difficulty in replacing employees, and also allows capable citizens to enter the civil service without hindrance. I've no idea how His Highness conceived this idea."

"She even had a very nice chat with Barov." Scroll jested.

"Ahem, he was simply consulting me about a few questions related to the laws of the noble, which I happened to have a good understanding of," Spear said, shaking her head. "Also, the new laws laid down by His Highness are very unique, and may even be implemented in the Fallen Dragon Ridge. I discussed this with Barov for a little longer."

"Oh? How are they unique?"

"Such as the part regarding the definition of citizenship..."

"Sister Wendy, when will I be able to light up the second magic stone?" Paper had joined in unexpectedly and bawled as she held up the Sigil of God's Will.

"When you're a bit older." Wendy reached her hand out to the young girl. "Come, let me give you a hug."

Paper held on to Wendy's outstretched hand and climbed into her embrace.

Wendy caressed Paper's head as she watched the other two witches discuss the new laws, and felt a sense of calm.

It would be so good if this life could last forever.

At this moment, a guard entered the hall. He first glanced around the room before walking up to the four witches with a slight hesitation.

"Something happened?" Wendy recognized him—he was a personal guard of His Highness.

"Lady Wendy, someone has arrived from outside the castle, and she claims that her daughter has just been awakened as a witch..." The guard said while making a salute. "His Highness has specified that when he's not around, you'll be in charge of such issues."

"What?" The three witches were shocked simultaneously. "A new awakened witch?"

"That's what the person said."

"Quick, take me to her," Wendy immediately responded.

...

At the main gate of the castle, Wendy saw two citizens waiting in the cold wind. One of them seemed about 40 years old, her hair already turned half-white, and the wrinkles on her forehead were deep and long. She was wearing an old-fashioned coat and her stature was slightly hunched. The other person was much younger, about 17 or 18 years old, and she stood reservedly beside the elder woman.

"This's Lady Wendy of the Witch Union." The guard introduced.

"Our greetings, Lady Wendy." The two citizens bowed respectfully.

"They claim to be migrants from the Southern Territory and that they moved into an inner city residential district half a month ago. I've verified their identity cards and found no issue with the information they provided."

"You're the witch?" Wendy looked towards the young woman and spoke in the tenderest voice she could. "What's your name?"

"Lady Wendy's asking you a question." The elder woman tugged on the younger one's sleeve.

"Summer," the latter murmured.

"You're her... mother?"

"Yes, yes, indeed. Her father is still working at the Furnace Area, so I brought her over." The elder woman nodded repeatedly. "Lady Wendy, may I ask if what His Highness stated on the bulletin is true... that witches are entitled to a wage of one gold royal every month?"

"It's true indeed, but she has to be willing to join the Witch Union."

"I..." Summer opened her mouth.

"She's willing, she's definitely willing to serve and dedicate everything to His Highness." The mother interrupted her daughter. "Do we have to sign a contract? When will we receive the money?"

These words made Wendy frown uncontrollably. It was not hard to decipher from her tone that the mother not only treated her daughter as an object for sale, but also thought that the Witch Union was a place of pleasure for His Highness.

Wendy held back her unhappiness and replied placidly, "His Highness is currently handling some affairs in Longsong Stronghold, and I'm not sure when he'll be back. Furthermore, there'll be a few examinations and tests before she can join the Union. You may leave your daughter to our care in the castle, and when His Highness returns, we'll arrange for you to sign the

contract."

No matter what, Summer was innocent, and thus Wendy did not want to impose her anger towards the ignorant mother on to her. Even though witches were already accepted by the majority of the town's inhabitants, the refugees who recently arrived in the Western Region still possessed a gross misunderstanding of them.

"I'll entrust her to you, Lady Wendy." The mother made a deep bow and then patted her daughter's head. "Behave well and don't disappoint His Highness."

"Mom, I..." Summer wanted to say something, but the elder woman had already turned and walked towards the exit ramp.

Chapter 466: Reappearance

"Summer, right? Don't worry." Wendy walked up to the young woman and held her hand. "The Witch Union isn't what your family thinks, nor do you have to stay in the castle all the time."

"Really?" Summer asked softly.

"Of course." Wendy smiled. "We stay in the castle because we have nowhere else to go... before His Highness took us in, we lived vagrant lives. Our families were either broken or perceived us as strangers. You're considered fortunate to have a family." She paused briefly. "Let's go inside, the wind is strong here."

"... OK." The young woman lowered her head and followed Wendy into the castle.

"This's the new awakened witch?" Scroll was already waiting at the door. "What's her name?"

"Summer," Wendy replied, and then look towards the guard. "Can you help me inform Lady Agatha to return to the castle? Tell her that there's a new witch. She should be in the riverside chemical lab right now."

"My pleasure to serve you, Lady Wendy." The guard bowed before he turned and exited.

"Indeed, when Nightingale and Sylvie aren't around, only Agatha

is able to distinguish magic power by type and capacity." Scroll nodded in agreement. "What's her ability?"

"We don't know yet." Wendy then caressed the young girl's head and asked, "How old are you?"

"18." Summer became nervous again in front of so many strangers.

"18?" Spear seemed surprised. "Isn't that the age of adulthood?"

"When did you realize that you were awakened as a witch?" Scroll asked. "Tell us your story in detail."

"Just... three days ago, when I turned 18," Summer replied meekly. "That day, my elder brother caught a fish for me as a gift, but it was taken away by my second sister, and only half of the tail was left for me in the end. At night, I hugged my quilt and cried. I then dreamt that the fish returned to my bowl. When I woke up, I discovered that the fish was indeed there, and I also had a new elder sister."

"A new elder sister... what does that mean?" Wendy asked in astonishment.

"One was sitting at the table and eating fish, while the other one was paralyzed with fear on the floor. However, the former soon disappeared together with the fish..." Summer recalled what happened. "At that time, I could feel that... those things that

appeared had something to do with me. However, when I told my family about it, I was beaten up by my father and told not to scare my second sister. I really didn't scare her on purpose. Who would think that a dream could become real?"

"That wasn't a dream." Wendy confirmed what the girl said. "It was an awakening call."

Magic power would gather inside a witch's body on the aforementioned Day of Awakening. During this process, a witch would not only be able to feel the weird changes inside her body, but also, for a majority of witches, they would be unable to restrain the strange magic power, causing them to use their newly-gained ability involuntarily. Hence, apart from the extremely unbearable Day of Adulthood, the second highest cause of loss of witches was the Day of Awakening—the consequence of performing magical effects in front of normal people was obvious.

However, Wendy had never heard of a case whereby the Day of Adulthood and Day of Awakening fell on the same day. Albeit this was no doubt possible—the Day of Adulthood was just a more special Day of Awakening.

"After that, my second sister called me a witch and said that I had to leave home. My elder brother retorted that there was no issue with me being a witch as there were many witches in the town. My family quarreled over this..." Summer's voice became even softer as she spoke. "In the end, they decided to send me here."

It thus seemed that even people who had recently arrived from the Southern Territory were already being influenced by the

town's propaganda. Fortunately for Summer, she was not tied up and handed over to the church, like many witches were. The unfortunate thing was that her family was ultimately unable to accept a witch. However, Wendy was confident that this kind of situation would be improved over time... the original inhabitants of Border Town were a good example.

After Wendy enquired about a few more details from Summer, Agatha walked into the hall, looking worn out.

"Is this the newly discovered witch?"

Wendy nodded and recounted Summer's identity and awakening experience. "How does the Union test a witch's ability?"

Agatha took a magic stone out of her waist pocket after she was done listening. "It's usually divided into two sections. One is to observe a thorough performance of the ability, and the other is to use the Stone of Measuring to measure the aggregate level of the magic power." Then, she looked at Summer and instructed. "Close your eyes and feel the magic power revolve inside your body."

"Does she need a partner to assist her?" Wendy appeared anxious. "She became a witch only three days ago. I'm afraid that she knows nothing about her magic power."

"No need." Agatha chuckled. "I'm only worried that she's scared."

As they spoke, the magic-filled stone emitted a ray of pale green

light that enveloped Summer. A mist gradually appeared around her chest. Its center was pale yellow in color and it seemed like it could dissipate at any time.

"She wasn't lying." After observing briefly, Agatha stopped the operation of the Stone of Measuring. "It's indeed a feature that only occurs when the Day of Awakening and the Day of Adulthood are on the same day. The type of ability is... the summoning type which you're all familiar with. The level of magic power is... extremely low."

"Extremely low?" Wendy winced. "Did such a coincidence also occur in Taquila?"

"The Union had witnessed the awakening of thousands of witches. Something like this was rather common." Agatha replied proudly. "As for witches who awakened only near the end of adulthood, it was as if they never had a Day of Adulthood."

"What?"

"Their magic powers were never able to develop and thus remained in the pre-adulthood form forever. Naturally, they didn't have the derivative skills and steady growth that were unique to adulthood. I don't know if such witches were able to have High Awakenings, but if they were unable to develop, the problems with their magic power would bug them for the rest of their lives. She paused briefly. "We should have a look at Summer's ability first. After all, magic capacity is only one aspect. The ability itself is the best way to gauge a witch's value."

"Agatha!" Wendy exclaimed while frowning. Every witch should be treated as a fellow sister, instead of being valued based on her ability.

"This is how it's done in the Holy City." Agatha was unmoved. "Sure... I believe His Highness' saying that every ability has its own special use, but they're still distinguishable by their quality."

"What are you... arguing about?" Summer opened her eyes, looking confused.

"Nothing much." Wendy forcibly smiled and said in a comforting voice, "Try to demonstrate your ability to everyone."

"Yes..." The young woman held her breath and slowly reached out her hands. Soon, the four people present were able to see the effects—they saw figures of themselves positioned on the other side of the hall. Two of them seemed to be discussing something, but not a sound was heard. Suddenly, Paper, who had left the hall a long while ago, reappeared beside Wendy and slowly crawled into Wendy's arms, revealing a sweet smile on her face.

Wendy subconsciously reached out a hand to the figure of herself, but her fingertips passed through the figure as if there was nothing there.

Chapter 467: You're Irreplaceable

After the illusion disappeared, the lobby fell into an eerily silence.

After a while, Scroll finally sighed and said, "No wonder your sister fell over in shock. That's quite... terrifying indeed."

"The ability to place an entire group under an illusion is very rare, but not new..." Agatha said slowly. "When I was in the Union, I knew at least two witches with similar powers, one of which was a Senior Witch from Starfall City."

"How many times can you use this ability every day?" asked Wendy. "Can you control the specific time period that the illusion shows?" According to His Highness' usual practices, there should be a comprehensive test of her ability that sought to understand its characteristics, efficacy and usage.

"About... two or three times," whispered Summer, "and what do you mean by time period? Are you asking how recent the things I show are?" Seeing Wendy nod, Summer stroked her own head in embarrassment. "I've never tested it, but I think earlier things take more effort..."

Wendy couldn't help but laugh. "It doesn't take effort, but the magic power inside your body."

"Magic power?"

"You should be able to feel it flowing inside you like water, or floating inside you like fog. Using your ability requires magic power," explained Scroll. "There're so many things to learn about magic power, and I'll teach them all to you in the future."

"Uh-huh." Summer nodded.

Then, Wendy instructed Summer to use all her powers to display an illusion. This time, the illusion was from a day and a half ago, when the lights were shining in the lobby, and the sisters of the Witch Union were having dinner at a long table. Afterwards, Summer completely exhausted her magic power and lowered her arms, panting, with beads of sweat emerging on her forehead.

Wendy recorded the results of the two tests on a notebook, but she couldn't think of a single use for Summer's ability. "Her illusions can only show the past but can't predict the future, so we'll have to wait for His Highness Roland to return and judge." At this thought, she couldn't help but feel a little frustrated. His Highness once told her that he wanted to make the Witch Union a self-governing organization and to appoint her as the director. However, she wasn't as nearly knowledgeable as His Highness, so she couldn't think of all the uses for her sisters' abilities as well as he could.

After collecting her emotions, Wendy was about to say a few words of encouragement to Summer, when Scroll made a gesture towards her.

The two witches stepped aside, and Wendy asked, "What's wrong?"

"Were you planning on telling Summer that she could stay here if she didn't want to go home?" Scroll asked with a frown. "Did you forget that witches need to be verified before joining the Witch Union?"

Wendy obviously knew that witches needed to answer ten questions about their identity and background under the supervision of Nightingale before being accepted. "But Summer probably didn't lie... Her identification was made by Soraya, and her background matches up. Not to mention that she just awakened and is a non-combat type witch, so even the church won't be able to predict something like this."

"Magic power isn't the only thing that can harm someone. A dagger or a pack of poison can have the same effect, if not better."

"No, how could she possibly..."

"But you can't rule out this possibility." Scroll interrupted. "The City Hall is in charge of resident verification and won't inspect every household, so a sudden awakening is actually the best way of getting into the castle..." She paused. "I know that this possibility is very small, but don't forget that we can't afford to lose His Highness Roland. Lady Tilly is also living in the witch building right now, so if something happens to her, the relationship between Border Town and Sleeping Island will completely splinter, and all of His Highness' work will be for nothing. It's too high of a risk."

"..." Wendy was silent. She knew that Scroll's concerns were reasonable and weren't targeting Summer, but she still found them hard to accept. As the first witch to be awakened in the town under the rule of Roland, Summer was treated as a potential enemy spy, which was simply heartbreaking. After a long time, Wendy said, "I understand. I'll send her back."

"I'll go with you." Scroll sighed.

...

After they left the castle, Summer instantly became much more energetic and began holding Wendy's hand and asking about the witches and the lord.

"What's wrong?" Wendy asked after answering all her questions.
"Why are you so glad that you don't have to live in the castle?"

"Uh..." Summer gulped and lowered her head in embarrassment.
"I heard that the lord, or His Highness, is a very scary person and ravages all the women around him every day."

"Pfft!" Wendy almost choked in shock. "Where did you hear that from?"

"Isn't he Prince Roland of the Kingdom of Graycastle? I've heard this many times in Eagle City, and there are even folk songs that say the Second Prince is conniving, Prince Roland is lecherous, and

only Princess Garcia of Port of Clearwater is a good ruler," whispered Summer.

"I see..." Scroll said with great interest. "This's probably Garcia's way of promoting herself. It's quite unique."

"Is he... not that kind of person?"

"Of, of course not," Wendy said, blushing. "You'll soon learn that he's the lord who is worthy of the witches' trust!"

They came to the residential area where Summer's family lived, walked up to a two-story house, and knocked on her door.

Summer's mother answered the door.

"Mom, I'm back!" shouted Summer excitedly.

"How did you..." She paused and stared at the two people behind her daughter with a panicked look. "Did she do something wrong? Why don't you want her?"

"His Highness hasn't returned yet, so..."

"She can stay in the castle and wait for His Highness to return," said Summer's mother impatiently. "Summer is very obedient. She might be a little slow, but she'll do anything you ask her to do."

"Ma'am, the Witch Union isn't what you think it..." Wendy felt anger rushing into her heart, but Scroll interrupted her before she could finish her sentence.

Scroll took out one gold royal and waved it in front of the woman. "Your daughter is indeed a witch, so we'll sign the contract when His Highness returns. Here's your compensation for the first month."

"Yes, yes." The woman's attention immediately moved on the shiny coin. "Thank you, my lady!"

"Remember, you're now taking care of her on behalf of His Highness. Understand?"

"Yes, my lady, I'll take good care of Summer."

...

After they left the house, Wendy couldn't contain her anger anymore. "How could you pay such a terrible woman? Even if you were paying in advance, you should have paid Summer."

"Would Summer be able to keep the gold royal?" Scroll's answer shocked Wendy. "If she can't keep it for herself, the money will eventually fall into her family's hands; if she can, she'll be completely alienated by her family. That's why I gave the money directly to her mother, so Summer won't have to carry this burden, and it might help to raise her status in her family. She has

so much time ahead of her. If we can use the gold royal to buy a better life for her, then it's a good deal."

"..." Wendy pondered for a while and said, "You're right. I was too naive."

The consecutive setbacks greatly discouraged Wendy, and she began to think that she wasn't good enough to lead the Witch Union.

"However, no one cares about them more than you do," said Scroll with a smile, as if she had read her thoughts. "After being in the Witch Cooperation Association led by Cara, I realize that... a trustworthy leader would care about her witches whole heartedly and always put their interests first, regardless of their abilities. That's exactly why you're irreplaceable."

Chapter 468: The Return

After two weeks, Roland was finally on his way home.

After clearing out the four noble families and Black Street Rats with an iron hand, he could, for the time being, start the reform of Longsong Stronghold from scratch. Relief and resettlement measures were underway in an orderly fashion. Although the gold royals and provisions seized from the territories of the Maple Leaf, Wolf, and Wild Rose families weren't as abundant as the ones seized from Duke Ryan, they were still a shocking amount. That was why he could expand the relief program to the entire city unscrupulously, and successfully promote his policies during the porridge distribution.

By the day of his departure, the Second Army had reached its target of recruiting 500 people, and the police department had newly added about 200 new members as well. Roland left half of his soldiers and Vader in Stronghold, so that they could not only manage defenses and maintain order, but could also train the new recruits into usable warriors.

He knew the time for him to implement his policies was limited. If he failed to facilitate the direct communication between the people and the City Hall and did not establish his authority among the masses quickly enough, the ancient power would return to fill the current power gap. As the saying goes, there could be no construction without destruction. He had already completed the destruction, and now it was time to construct and boom Stronghold.

Roland's source of confidence was Border Town, whose population had grown to over 30,000 people, more than half of which were receiving elementary education. This would equal to the size of two modern day middle schools, but it was a shocking number for this era. Furthermore, elementary education was not just about reading skills, but also included basic knowledge of science and politics, as well as a universal sense of patriotism.

The increase in literacy rate would provide him with enough manpower for the revolution. Also, compared to ignorant and meek civilians, a sense of patriotism will enable them to burst out unimaginable power. The town's subjects were each small sparks that would one day set off a great fire in the entire land.

As the sky dimmed, Roland saw the town looming against the darkness.

"Look... what's that?" a member of the nobility shouted behind him.

"A... bridge?" said another person, craning his neck. "My goodness, it's way too long."

"That's impossible! How could such a long bridge be supported with only two pillars?"

"Wait... it seems to be made of steel!"

On the way back, apart from the witches, there were dozens of

lower-level nobles on Roland's boat, who had not participated in the rebellion and therefore survived the cleanup.

According to Roland's plan, those lower-level nobles would learn to hierarchically manage the City Hall. After the city construction was officially under way, they would return to Stronghold and help Petrov build the secondary City Hall to carry out and give him feedback on his orders. After the nobles lost their feudal privileges, they would all want to improve, and the only thing they could rely on was their own abilities.

As the fleet passed the steel bridge, Roland heard the astonished gasps of the nobles behind him. Everyone held their breaths and stared as the steel bridge that stretched over the entire width of the river flitted over their heads.

The prince couldn't help but laugh at these people, who had not stopped exclaiming since they boarded the boat. First, they were shocked that a boat made of stone could float on water, and then they were amazed by the spinning wheel and the puffing steam engine. "It's a shame that the town's Three Supplies Project isn't completed," he thought, "otherwise their jaws would drop to the floor when they saw the power of light bulbs."

The boats slowly docked with a sharp whistle. Barov, Carter, and a group of City Hall officials had received the carrier pigeon and were waiting by the shore. When they saw Roland, they set off celebration cannons and welcomed him with a set of formalities fit for a king.

Roland smiled and patted the two men's shoulders, and then he

brought Barov over to the Stronghold nobles and introduced everyone to each other. "You're in charge of these people's housing, lives, and education," he said quietly to Barov. "Don't mind their identities and titles, since they are barons at most. There're all kinds of people in the mines, and they all have to work to live an honest living. Train them like you would do to new graduates. I want to see the results as soon as possible."

"Yes, Your Highness."

When Roland returned to the castle, all the witches who had heard about his return were waiting in the lobby. Before he could even feel the effects of the heating system on entering the door, a warm body leaped into his arms. He smelled the familiar scent of her hair and patted her head, smiling. "I'm back."

"Uh-huh." Anna raised her head, her blue eyes sparkling with joy. "I've been waiting for you for a long time."

"Me too!"

"And me! Coo!"

Soon, Roland felt an extra weight on each of his arms... He didn't even have to look to know that it was Lightning and Maggie, because no one else would interrupt him and Anna.

"Hey, you two basically went along with him." Mystery Moon complained.

"Yeah." Lily scoffed. "No shame!"

"I'm just glad you're all back safe and sound," said Wendy gently.

"We should celebrate tonight," Scroll suggested.

"Yay! I want ice cream bread!" Andrea exclaimed. "With Ashes' and Shavi's portions, I'll be feasting tonight!"

The last to walk up to him was Tilly Wimbledon.

She stuck out her hand and said casually, "You've had a long journey."

"Thank you." Roland smiled and grasped her extended hand.

...

After a hearty dinner, Roland returned to his office and sighed heavily. Although the castle of Stronghold was much bigger, this small place was much more comfortable.

Just as he was about to sort out the books he brought over from Stronghold, Anna entered the room.

"You came just in time." Roland pointed to the books piled on the

rug. "Look, these are my presents for you. They're mostly historical records and legendary tales, while others are secret stories of the Western Region, and they were all taken from Duke Ryan's library. Oh, right, this one is..."

Before he could finish, he felt a pair of soft lips press onto his.

They brought a sweet scent mixed with passion and warm moisture.

"I really missed you," Anna pronounced each word with due stress after she disengaged from Roland, looking deeply into his eyes.

As he stared back at her, Roland felt a sense of warmth swarming upon his heart. "This book..."

"I'll read it later."

"Good idea."

The two became entangled in a kiss.

Chapter 469: Don't Make Her Wait Forever

The next day, Roland walked into his office humming and found that Wendy was already there waiting for him.

"What's the matter?" He stepped over the messy pile of books on the floor and poured her a cup of tea.

"Congratulations, there's a new witch in Border Town." She smiled and told him about everything that happened in the past few days. "If you need, I can summon Summer to the castle anytime."

"The first witch awakened in my territory... She's also the first witch recruited after my public recruitment notice." Roland's face was instantly lit up, but when he heard the second half of the sentence, he asked curiously, "Isn't she in the castle right now?"

"No, because Nightingale wasn't there to verify her identity." Wendy repeated what Scroll insisted. "We sent her home and paid the first month's salary in advance."

"That wasn't a bad idea." Roland nodded. "Tell her to come and sign the contract this afternoon."

"Yes, my lord..." responded Wendy, who was obviously dying to say something else.

"What's the matter?"

"Aren't you angry about people's opinions towards you and the Witch Union? Also..." she paused for a while before saying through gritted teeth, "Also, my ability might not be suitable for leading the Witch Union. Scroll is more experienced and mature than I am, so I think she should be in charge."

"I'm sure you also brought this up to Scroll?" asked Roland with great interest. "And then she told you that you were the best candidate?"

"Huh?"

"I guess I was right..." He sighed. "And I feel the same way. Administration techniques and methods can be learned through experience, but personality is much harder to change. Haven't you realized that the most loved member of the witches, besides Maggie, is you? Also, Scroll is mostly in charge of the education department and will only be busier in the future, so she won't have much time to communicate with the new witches, which happens to be your strength. You should give yourself more credit. I'm an excellent judge of character."

Before Wendy could answer, the prince continued, "As for the misconceptions that civilians have towards the Witch Union, I really have overlooked them. I never thought that this body... no, my previous reputation would spread all over the kingdom." He pondered for a while. "I must fix this rumor as quickly as possible. On top of further advertisement, I also think it's best for the organization to run independently."

"Run... independently?"

"Yes, I want to turn it into a department, just like the City Hall." Roland had considered this issue before. There were only around a dozen witches in the Union now, so he still could manage all of them. However, if it expanded to hundreds of members or were on a scale as big as the Holy City of Taquila with thousands of witches in it, he obviously couldn't handle them all alone. They needed to establish a governing system that could operate independently and assign witches to different positions, and he would only serve to give suggestions based on their abilities and evolution.

After he explained his thoughts to her, Wendy said hesitantly, "But there're hundreds of people in City Hall, while there're only about a dozen sisters, and they all have their own issues to tend to... Also, how would this change the citizens' opinions toward us?"

"Rumors are like fear because they both come from the unknown. The town residents can accept witches because they personally experience the benefits that Nana and Lily bring," Roland said with a smile. "Allowing commoners to join the Witch Union will not only solve the issue of insufficient staff, but also help the people better understand this organization—voluntary promotion through the people themselves will definitely help improve the people's impression of witches, and your work and contributions to the town will be well-known by the public."

Just like how academies of sciences didn't just hire scientists, a great number of commoners were required for daily errands, administrative duties, and research organization. If he wanted the

witches to be accepted by all the people, he would need them to understand each other better, so placing witches and commoners in each other's lines of work made sense.

"I see." Wendy nodded. "This is a pretty good idea. But how do we select these people?"

"Since you'll be operating independently, you'll also have to do your own recruiting and screening." Roland stroked his chin. "You can ask Countess Spear about this, because she should be pretty good at constructing an organization centered around witches. However, there're only a few members in the Witch Union, so you can start by hiring an assistant or staff member as practice. After the Months of Demons, I'll build a new building next to the City Hall, which you can use as the base for the Witch Union."

He didn't mention that since it was the Witch Union, they wouldn't only be in charge of the Witches in Western Region or Kingdom of Graycastle. If he could build the right infrastructure, the Union would be able to immediately cooperate with the witch organizations of all the kingdoms he absorbed.

"I got it." Wendy inhaled deeply. "If you have decided to give me this task, I'll try my best to carry it out."

...

After Wendy left, Roland continued to organize the books from yesterday.

Looking at the pages scattered all over the floor, he couldn't help thinking of last night's fiery and passionate kiss. Anna's fragrant hair, sparkling eyes, and soft body made him tingle with excitement. Although she once burned all of her clothes to the ground without any hesitation when she first met him, he had not been as tremulous as he was then.

It was probably because she was still a helpless little girl back then, and now she was a strong and beautiful woman—in only a year, she had changed so much.

"Maybe I should take the initiative and respond to her..." Roland's thoughts were interrupted when his hands touched someone else's finger, and he realized that Nightingale was handing a book to him. "Let me help you."

"Um..." Roland paused with a start. Last night, when Anna followed him into his office and embraced him, he didn't notice if Nightingale had also followed them into the room from the banquet.

"Don't worry, I left immediately last night and didn't stick around to be the third wheel." Nightingale rolled her eyes. "I guessed that after having not seen you for a long time, she would throw herself at you—she never represses her emotions."

"Is... that so?"

With Nightingale's help, the books were quickly organized and put on the shelves, filling up each vacancy.

"Alright..." Roland stuffed the last book into a remaining vacancy on the shelves. "Thank you."

"Alas. How long are you going to drag this on for? Don't make her wait forever..."

Roland paused and turned around. Nightingale had already disappeared, but her final words still echoed in his ears. Although her voice was very low, he was certain about what he heard.

"... and don't make me wait forever either."

Chapter 470: The New Warship

As Roland walked up to the path leading to the North Slope Mountain, Nightingale's remarks were still ringing in his ears.

He was suddenly enlightened. "That's right," he thought. "I'm no longer just a regular man who only interacts with blueprints all day, and this is no longer the world I used to live in. Now, I'm a lord of a great territory, and I might become a king one day, so if my situation ever changes, I can't use my old approaches to hold myself back."

"I just have to follow my heart," he told himself. "If I force anything because of some insignificant 'principles', it could only result in continuing to hurt Anna and Nightingale."

At this thought, Roland felt a weight had been lifted off his heart. He inhaled deeply and pushed open the backyard door.

Opening the steel door was just like opening his heart and he instantly saw a whole new world.

"Oh... Here comes His Highness!" Hummingbird and Lucia ran up to greet him.

"You're here." Anna smiled sweetly. Roland saw a faint red mark on her pale neck and couldn't help but recall the passionate scene last night. However, since he already made his decision, he didn't mind waiting a little bit more.

"Have you completed the model?"

"Of course." Anna made a beckoning motion. When the two walked out of the yard, they saw a steel boat floating in the middle of a pond surrounded by snow. The steel boat was about one meter long and twenty centimeters wide, seeming much slimmer than those unwieldy concrete boats. The bow had a distinct thin point, its stern was flat, and the unique part of it was that the hull was covered with overlapping supporting bars as if it were pieced together with thousands of squares.

"This is exactly what I wanted," Roland exclaimed. Compared to the concrete boats that were poured into steel molds, the pure steel boat had a unique delicateness, and the overlapping bars made it look like a work of art. He knew that every piece of this model was cut with Blackfire according to shrunken proportions, without a single junction missing. If this model were brought to the modern world, it would be worth tens of thousands yuan.

"Is this the new kind of boat you want to build?"

"Yes." Roland nodded. "It's also the town's first regular warship."

Originally, Roland planned to use the concrete boats as shallow water gunboats, but he realized that if the steam engines didn't provide enough power, the concrete boats would be too slow. Even when only carrying fuel and crew, the fleet's average speed during the journey to Longsong Stronghold was only eight to nine kilometers per hour. If the boats also had to carry 152 millimeters

Stronghold Cannon, gunpowder, and other weapons, their speed could drop to as low as five kilometers. This was equivalent to even less than three knots per hour. This was due to the big dead weight of concrete, which wasn't an issue in simple supply transport, but it was an undesirable feature in warships.

If the town was still suffering from a lack of steel like it was two months ago, Roland would have to put up with this flaw. However, with the production of Star of Steel, the current amount of steel inventory was enough to build a true steel-clad warship. Roland chose the simplest technique of module assembly, which meant soldering pieces of steel boards together with beams to form a large hollow unit, and then connecting these units together to form the hull bottom. This piecing method eliminated the traditional need for a keel, and since the enemy did not have any cannons, he did not worry about defense mechanisms. The sides of the hull were made almost entirely of thin steel plates, thus minimizing the cost and dead weight.

As for the propulsion, Roland decided to use the propeller technology instead of a paddle wheel. The power still came from a steam engine that turned the two propellers by rotating gears. In the blueprint he gave Anna, he also left room for it to be remodeled as a triple-expansion steam engine since he planned to invent a new type of steam engine more suited for boats when he began mass-producing the steel boats.

When they returned to the backyard, Anna began to cut the first steel plate.

The Blackfire in her hand acted like a precise ruler that instantly

sliced a thick steel block into seven thin plates, each exactly five millimeters thick.

Next came the soldering. Hummingbird reduced the weights of the steel beams and placed them between two plates, and Anna's Blackfire turned into an extremely thin and hot line and sewed the three components together like thread. This was completely different from her original soldering technique, because her Blackfire heated the steel from the inside, allowing the liquid steel to completely fill all crevices. After the three were completely combined, the beam was lowered by about a millimeter, which meant that its bottom had completely filled the space between the two plates.

A cross made by steel beams could connect four plates, and more crosses could form a hollow box unit. These units were lightened by Hummingbird and transported to the Redwater River, where they were assembled together at the dock.

Meanwhile, Roland's eyes never left Anna's busy figure. Her flaxen hair swayed with her cutting motions like a spirit dancing in the pure white snow.

...

In the afternoon, Roland met Summer, the newly awakened witch.

Since she was in his office, it meant that she had passed Nightingale's verification. Wendy had already clearly recorded her

ability, so Roland need not perform any more tests but immediately placed the contract in front of her.

Summer held the pen awkwardly for a while before saying with a red face, "I... can't write."

"That's alright." Roland smiled. "You can also sign with your fingerprint."

She carefully pressed her inked thumb onto the parchment. "Is that all?"

"Yes." Roland rolled up the contract. "Wendy has told me every detail about your situation, so even though you signed the contract, you don't have to live in the castle. You only need to come here every day to practice and attend classes. Has Wendy told you about the characteristics of magic power?"

"Yes, Your Highness." As soon as she learned that she did not need to live in the castle, Summer became much more relaxed. "Lady Wendy said that if I don't release the magic power that's accumulating every day, I'll be in great danger on my Day of Awakening."

"That's right, so you have to practice well. I know she'll continue to teach you how to precisely control magic power and its connection with your ability." Roland didn't correct her honorifics because he thought it would be best for a beginner to have some awe. "If there's anything you don't understand, you can ask any member of the Witch Union."

"I understand, Your Highness," she said with her head lowered. "But... do you think this ability is completely useless? I asked Lady Wendy about this, and she said only Your Highness would have the answer."

"Of course not," Roland said with a smile. "You have the ability of a detective, so you'll be very helpful in fighting crimes."

"Detective?" Summer looked confused.

"Don't worry. Soon you'll understand." He summoned Nightingale from her Mist. "From now on, this witch will be your supervisor."

Chapter 471: A Reunion

It was evening. Ferlin Eltek was in his study looking over the newly issued textbooks when he suddenly heard someone knocking on the main door.

"Dear, I'm busy toasting bread. Why don't you get the door?" Irene shouted from the kitchen. "It could be Miss May."

"Okay."

He closed the book, walked to the front door in the living room, and unlocked the latch. The person standing outside caught him completely by surprise.

"Father! What brings you here?" Ferlin exclaimed.

"I followed His Highness here," the old knight said while brushing off the snow on his shoulders. "In fact, I arrived in Border Town yesterday. Though I told them that my son is living here, they still arranged a house for me in a residential area near the castle."

"Come in. It's cold outside." Ferlin hastily moved out of the way.

"Yes." The knight seemed surprised as he stepped into the house.
"You have... central heating in here?"

"You know central heating?"

"I only found out about it today. The last time I was here, I'd already felt that the city was inexplicably warm. I'd thought that the heating equipment mentioned by His Highness was a new type of fireplace. When I visited the City Hall this time, I discovered that it could be equally warm indoors without fire. Only then did I realize that it made use of steam to produce heat." He took off his coat and hung it on the stand next to the door. "Wait... I recall that the last time we went together to the City Hall, you weren't sure what it was as well."

"I only understood after reading a City Hall bulletin." Ferlin poured a cup of tea for his father. "Before they do anything, they would always spend some time to explain it to the citizens. The bulletin area in the square is now even more popular than the Convenience Market."

"Does it mean that, within two months, His Highness was able to install the device in the homes of ordinary citizens?" The knight said approvingly. "Wouldn't it have cost thousands of gold royals?"

"Our residential area was among the first to be installed with it. The western and northern zones are still in the process of ditching. It's said that water and heating supply are part of the Three Supplies Project. When the construction is completed, we'll be able to do things at night as we do in the day."

"Nights like days?" The knight's eyebrows were raised. "Does it mean more candles or oil lamps?"

"Neither. The City Hall officials claim that electricity will be delivered to every home."

"Electricity?" The old man was stupefied.

"I also think that it's beyond reason, but that's what His Highness' propaganda states." Ferlin agreed with his father. "With electricity, nights will be as bright as days." Curiously, the news sounded utterly absurd when he had heard it, but deep down in his heart, he had a feeling that since it was His Highness' words, it was not completely impossible.

After all, Roland was always creating new miracles.

"Good evening, Knight Eltek..." Just then, Irene scurried out of the kitchen, and in her hurry, she almost dropped the plate of half-baked bread she was carrying while bowing.

The old knight laughed gently at the sight. "Hello, Miss Irene. Don't panic. I'm not yet hungry."

Ferlin saw his wife's cheeks begin to blush.

"Ahem." He cleared his throat before adding, "There'll be just two more dishes today. Take it easy, the night is still young."

...

The small family had an enjoyable dinner together. Irene was finally able to recover from her initial panic, and after the three of them chatted for a while, she began to clear up the utensils. Meanwhile, Ferlin's father beckoned him into the study. Ferlin could sense that his father had something important to say.

Just as he expected, when the old knight sat down at the study desk, he calmly asked, "Do you know what has happened in Longsong Stronghold over the past few days?"

"I know a little..." Ferlin tried to phrase his words tactfully. "I've heard that there has been a rebellion by the four families. His Highness left Border Town to suppress it. It was publicized on the bulletin board."

"The City Hall even mentioned this?" The old knight was astonished for a brief moment before he explained the whole matter to Ferlin. "Though I sent someone to inform His Highness, I didn't expect him to arrive so quickly. The result was guessable. The four families were no match for His Highness' troops. The Maple Leaf, Wolf and Wild Rose families were completely crushed, leaving only the Elk Family in a critical state. Our family was nearly implicated in the event."

"What?" Ferlin was greatly surprised. "Father, you..."

"Of course it wasn't me." The knight sighed. "I'm already so old and don't wish to participate in such risky affairs, but your brother's different. He's eager to exceed your achievement and

prove his qualities as the heir. Regrettably, he took the wrong stand."

"Are you saying that Miso participated in the rebellion?" Ferlin's face sunk.

His father nodded. "After the rebellion collapsed, he was captured by His Highness' soldiers. On the day of judgment, I went to the square to see him for the last time."

"..." Ferlin closed his eyes. He thought of how, after he had become a superstar knight, his brother constantly tried to make life difficult for him. Yet, Miso was his younger brother after all, and thus it was saddening to see him come to such a tragic end.

"Because he had no blood on his hands and surrendered compliantly, he was sentenced to 10 years of labor. He should be in the North Slope Mine now."

The latter part of his father's words made Ferlin regain his spirits. "10 years of labor? I thought you meant that he was..."

"Executed?" The knight shook his head in disagreement. "When I said I saw him for the last time, I meant the last time he was a member of the family. From that moment, he was no longer a part of the Eltek Family."

"You... severed ties with him."

"Correct." The knight inhaled a deep breath. "I'd warned him long ago, but he never took my words to heart. Someone who fools around with the family's future and risks the fate of every family member is definitely not suitable to be the successor." Even though he spoke assertively, his facial expression betrayed his sadness, and the wrinkles on his forehead deepened. "Now, I only have you as my child."

"Father..." Ferlin felt his eye sockets tingling, and he involuntarily held his father's hands.

"I've never begged in my life. But this time, I hope that you'll succeed the Eltek Family. I have a premonition that it'll prosper again in your hands." The old knight said slowly. "I'd agreed to follow His Highness here also in order to occupy a good position in the upcoming reforms."

"But positions can't be inherited, Father... the Knight's position will also become an honorary title."

"I know, but you've ignored the benefits of connections and experience. His Highness has stated that the positions will be given out based on merit and outstanding ability. With the experiences and relationships that your predecessors have built up, your chances of getting a good position are far greater than that of the average person." He patted the back of his son's hands. "Even if you still wish to become a teacher, I shan't stand in your way, as long as you continue the family name."

Ferlin remained silent for a long before he finally nodded and said, "I understand, father. I promise you."

"If that's the case, I can rest assured." Knight Eltek seemed greatly relieved. "By the way, if you have the choice, which department do you wish to work in?"

"Well..."

"How about the Second Army? I've heard Chief Commander, Iron Axe, say that apart from the battlefield soldiers, the army also wants to form a strategy department. This plan will be tested out in the Second Army first." The old knight fixed his gaze on his son. "Actually, I know that your current job isn't your favorite line of work. If you were truly happy with reading books all day, you wouldn't have chosen to be a knight in the first place." His eyes seemed to pierce insightfully into Ferlin's heart. "You're still the Morning Light that I know, my child."

Chapter 472: A Pledge Of Love

"Garments, shoes, mugs, spoons and forks." May checked off each item by counting with her fingers. "Is there anything else I should take with me?"

The floor was littered with an assortment of household supplies, everything from a water kettle to a wooden bowl.

"The bedding is the most important," Irene thought and then said, "you'd better take a set of the pillow, sheets, and blanket."

Hearing these words, Rosia and Gait both burst out in a fit of giggles, but they were soon silenced, however, when May shot them a cold glance. "The bedding isn't necessary. Carter says he'll buy a new set from the marketplace. It's rumored they once belonged to the four families and were dug up from their mansion's basements."

"Wow, then they must be made of fine silk," Irene commented enviously. "I've heard there's a tailor in King's City retailing fabric and garments made of pure silk. It's unfortunate that only great nobles and wealthy merchants can afford them." If they came from the four families, they must be just as good."

"Yes, pretty much," May replied nonchalantly. "I remember he said one set was worth five gold royals."

"Wow..." The three girls gasped in surprise.

"Five, five gold royals! God Almighty!" Rosia smacked her lips. "It would take me nearly two years to make that much money."

"How can you compare to the Star of the Western Region?" Gait said derisively while tapping her on the head. "Miss May is a celebrity who has performed in King's City! As for His Excellency Carter, he's Chief Knight of His Highness. You can't compete with either of them!"

"That's really awesome, May," Irene said, looking at May with her radiant eyes. "I envy you so much."

May knew only Irene felt genuinely happy for her, and her sincerity was why Morning Light was attracted to her in the first place. May also wondered how a girl like Irene, who grew up in the theater, was impervious to worldly temptations and desires all the while retaining the innocence and kindness of childhood. Although she had put her past romance out of her mind, May was still delighted to see Irene was a little envious of her. "When you rise to fame, you can buy a set for yourself... You'll be paid several gold royals for starring in King's City just once, not to mention the tips you'll get from the nobles after the show."

"But how long will it take me to become as good as you?" Irene asked in frustration, mouth pulled tight.

"Looks like you're pretty busy here. Are you rehearsing?" Right then the door was swung open abruptly. A good-looking young man poked his head in and asked, "Am I interrupting?"

"His, His Excellency Carter!" Gait and Rosia immediately bowed.

"Good morning, Mr. Knight." Irene turned to smile at him. "We're discussing what May should take to your place and we were just talking about you."

"Really? What did you say about me?" Carter asked curiously, scratching the back of his head.

"Nothing!" May stared at him and thought silently that he always appeared to be the perfect gentleman when his mouth was shut, but the illusion was shattered once he started talking. "Why did you come here today? Today isn't your day off, is it?"

"Um... don't worry. His Highness gave me some time off today. So... I brought you a gift."

"A gift?"

May glanced about the room. Gait soon took the hint and said, "Oh, Miss May. I just remembered that I've got something to take care of. Feel free to let me know when you've finished packing."

"Me too. I have to do the laundry. It's been there for a few days now." Rosia also took her leave with a bow and pulled Irene away with her as she walked out of the room.

"Huh? I don't need to do anything. Hang on... I want to see May's gift too..." When the girl's voice gradually faded away, May sighed in relief and bolted the door. She turned to Chief Knight and asked, "So, what's the gift? I hope it's not a new invention of His Highness' again."

Carter glanced around before breaking the silence. "Your father..."

"He's busy. Do you think everyone has 'free time' like you?" May snapped impatiently. She had thought it would take a while for her father to become familiarized with the new surroundings after he moved from Stronghold to Border Town. However, to her surprise, he had found a clerical job at the City Hall in only one week, and there was nothing she could do about it. Now he was a regular employee at the Ministry of Construction.

"I'm busy, too." Carter threw up his hands in defense. "His Highness transferred one of the most efficient employees from the Ministry of Justice to Longsong Stronghold. Now I have to deal with all sorts of tasks. On top of interrogating spies and verifying the status of the residents, I also need to hunt for criminals at large. I don't even have time for meals these days. You have no idea how fierce these criminals are. Unlike any of the locals in Western Region, these guys are gangsters, initially hiding among refugees. Now, as things have gotten a little better, they've started to make trouble. But don't worry, they only stir up on the outskirts of town where the temporary camps are to the west and they won't get into the inner city easily. And, I'll catch any of them when they're found messing around."

Seeing Carter describe the matter so passionately, May broke into laughter. "Alright, I got it. So, Mr. Knight, as you're so devoted to the peace and order of the town, would you like to have lunch and a few drinks here before heading back to your business?"

"I'd love to, but I'm afraid my break is almost over." Carter put down the parcel in his hand. "Try this on to see if it fits. I asked His Highness to design it."

"His Highness?" May was a little surprised.

"Yes. When I told His Highness about our wedding date, he mentioned a type of gown specifically worn for weddings. The only thing is that it takes a lot of effort to make one. I begged His Highness for quite a while, and even bribed Miss Soraya with ice cream bread before I finally got this dress."

When May unfolded the fabric, she saw a snowy dress in the parcel.

May's heart stopped beating for a moment when the knight spread out the garment. It was a simple gown with elaborate and sophisticated details. The dress was simple in the sense that it was not ornamented with any jewels, nor was it hemmed with a gilding of gold. Instead, it was purely layered with white muslins. However, the cut of the dress was rather showy. It was tightened with a girdle and flared out into a contrasting, voluminous skirt below the waistline. The skirt rippled like waves, perfectly showcasing the ingenious handicraft embedded in its design.

She knew any girl, whether noble or peasant, would be fascinated by and obsessed with a gown like this just at the sight of it.

May gently caressed the snowy white gown that weighed almost nothing and retired to her bedroom to put it on.

When she was back in the living room, Carter's jaw dropped, struck by the breathtaking beauty he saw. "God, you are... stunning."

"Really?" A rare, vivid blush rose to her cheeks. She could imagine what she now looked like without even looking into a mirror. Chief Knight's gaping expression had already told her everything.

May went up to Carter and gently pressed her lips to his cheek. "Thank you for your gift. I really love it."

The knight flung his arms around her in response.

Watching Carter's face slowly approaching hers, May closed her eyes.

"It doesn't sound too bad to be called May Lannis," she thought.

Chapter 473: The Third Step Of City Construction

After two weeks' learning and exploration, Barov, the governor of the City Hall, held the first municipal plenary session in the castle hall at the end of the first month in spring of the new year at His Highness' request. Aside from the directors of all the departments, some of the nobles in Stronghold were also invited to the session, bringing the total number of the attendees to 65.

Barov knew the learning process itself was also an evaluation. After working as a City Hall governor for a year, he could now easily distinguish capable nobles from useless dandies and idlers. It was why half of the nobles had already failed the assessment.

As His Highness described, he had offered these petty nobles an opportunity to "catch the express train", but the reality was ruthless. People who were unable to keep pace with changes would be naturally obsolete as time went by. Barov shared the same thoughts. Whether His Highness was a demon or a god, it did not change the fact that his territory had manifested an atmosphere entirely different from those in other kingdoms. If this was a new era, he would be happy to dive into it with the prince.

The main topic of the discussion for today's meeting was the final vote on the unification act which would be enacted after the city construction. He would also need to inform the nobles in Stronghold of the act's contents. Barov had prepared for this moment for a long time, and now it was finally the time to uncover the details.

Everyone was given a thin hardcover book with gilded letters on its cover, which read Basic Laws of the Kingdom. It contained some core subjects of law drafted and edited by His Highness himself. He could tell just by its name that His Highness had big ambition, and he also believed the prince had the capacity to make towns beyond the Western Region flourish.

"Let's get started." Roland, who seated himself at the end of the long table, instructed with a nod.

"Yes, Your Highness." Barov cleared his throat and ventured. "Perhaps all of you have heard that we're going to build a city in the Western Region. The book in front of you is the unification act to be enacted in His Highness' territory once the construction of the city is completed. Feel free to read it through by yourself, or you can listen to my presentation. If you have any questions or concerns, interrupt me anytime, His Highness will answer them."

A slight rustle of pages swept over the hall. Barov flipped over the cover, revealing the first page of the book made of fine parchment.

"The first thing you see now is the outline of the contents, which contains the structure and institution of the new territory..."

"Article One: Roland Wimbledon shall reserve all the rights with respect to the territories under his jurisdiction."

"Article Two: The City Hall is the highest authority of the territory, administering all the matters concerning the territory under the supervision of Roland Wimbledon."

"Article Three: Every person, upon entry to the territory, shall have the right to gain the status of citizenship through multiple channels. The City Hall has the obligation to guarantee the provision of at least three such channels to the public."

"Article Four: Every individual, upon gaining the status of citizenship, shall not be discriminated based on gender or their former status, namely freeman, farmhand, servant, and slave. Every citizen of the territory has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law, and has the legal obligations to pay taxes, defend the territory and serve in the military."

"Article Five: Every noble shall be treated equally as a regular citizen and shall no longer be privileged based on his/her title. Titles shall be honorary without granting the subject noble executive power, and they shall be conferred by inheritance in accordance with the law."

"Article Six: Every citizen has the right to seek protection of life, security and personal properties from Roland Wimbledon."

"Article Seven: Every citizen has the right to education, liberty of work and marriage."

"Article Eight: Commercial interactions and free trade are encouraged in the territory, provided that such activities are carried out in accordance with the law."

"Article Nine..."

Barov ran his fingers through the pages while explaining the articles one by one. Few codes drafted by the nobles concerned civilians. Even freemen in the city were viewed as subjects of exploitation by great nobles. It was indeed a rare thing that the laws made by His Highness involved so many rights and protections of civilians. The prince probably believed they could only win the Battle of Doomsday with the help of people's power.

Barov didn't care who His Highness relied on. To him, nobles and civilians were the same. He only cared about trying his best to complete His Highness' tasks and keeping a firm grip on power. In King's City, he had been transferred from the Astrology Association to the Ministry of Finance, serving as an assistant to Treasurer. He had thought he would soon stand on the highest level of authority in the Kingdom of Graycastle, only to realize a decade of waiting had turned his ambition into a desolate, hopeless dream. He had obeyed King Wimbledon III's order to accompany Prince Roland to Border Town due to a faint and tenuous promise made to the past king, and also due to his morbid disappointment brooding for years. Yet, he had never expected his long-awaited dream would somehow come true in another way.

Barov had not seen a real demon, but he knew well the strength and power of the armored knights. If His Highness could defeat the knights at a single blow, he could certainly sweep away all his obstacles in the Kingdom. Eventually, the prince would ascend to the throne and become the reigning sovereign of the state, and he would be the Hand of the King. If the Treasurer was still alive by then, what a bitter countenance would he show to Barov?

...

As most of the contents in the outline had been read out to subjects in plain language before, none of the directors were surprised. However, when he read the part that stipulated the prohibition of human trafficking and the abolishment of slavery, the nobles began murmuring. All the other articles were passed unilaterally.

No one questioned the article on the reform of the noble. These petty nobles had not benefited much from their territories since most of their lands were in deserted areas, so they did not care much about the so-called feudal power and legislative power. Besides, after two weeks of study, many of them had planned to sell the territories to the City Hall and use the proceeds to start a new business, such as a machinery factory and a chemical plant.

The conference started in the morning and did not stop until the afternoon. Everybody was focused on the presentation. When it was time for lunch, the servants placed the food on the table to let the attendees eat while reading. Barov had a lot of water. Although he had a sore throat, he was happy to explain every detail of the articles to the people present.

Finally, they entered the last topic of discussion, which was the only article in the Basic Laws of the Kingdom that required everybody's opinions. It was the flag and the name of the new city.

The conference hall was soon filled with a buzz of debate.

Barov asked everybody to come up with a name and an ideal

design for the flag. The attendees would have to place their work on the table and pick the best one.

After several rounds of voting, the flag and the name of the new city were nailed.

The design of the flag was based on the emblem of the royal family of the Kingdom of Graycastle. Its basic pattern was a gun and a tower, above which was a big pentagram with three smaller ones below. The big pentagram represented Lord Roland Wimbledon, while the smaller ones each represented the City Hall, the Army, and the Witch Union.

As for the city name, they picked "City of Neverwinter".

Chapter 474: The Killing Machine

Two days after the enlarged meeting, Iron Axe was ordered to test new weapons again.

Since the northwest side was vulnerable to the attacks of demonic beasts, the new shooting range was set on the other side of the Redwater River. When Iron Axe got there, the prince's guards had already surrounded the place with hemp ropes and red flags, and set a checkpoint at either end of the steel bridge. Unauthorized personnel were not allowed in that area.

Obviously, His Highness took the test on new weapons seriously.

Iron Axe walked quickly in the uneven snow, and every guard he met gave him a friendly glance. Seeing this, he could not help but remember his first time participating in a test of flintlocks. Back then, he was a nobody, and the people of the Kingdom of Graycastle were vigilant and suspicious of him because he was from the Sand Nation. He had lived in the town for five years by then, but only had built up relations with hunters living near him because of his expertise in archery, and no one knew him beyond the Old District.

At the time, he believed that he would live in seclusion in this desolate town as a hunter until he died of old age, or got killed by demonic beasts or prey. He didn't expect that His Highness would hand-pick him and show him the power of fire and thunder. Then, fast changes began to happen. He fought against demonic beasts in the Militia, which was then turned into Border Town's First Army. He was promoted rapidly from Head of the Hunter Squad to

Commander of the First Army. To his great surprise, and to make up for his greatest regret of his life, he had met the heiress of the Osha clan, Lady Drow Silvermoon, again in the town because of His Highness' open attitude towards witches. Due to this trust, recognition, and improvement of his fate, he swore allegiance to his new lord deep within his heart.

In the middle of the shooting range, Iron Axe saw His Highness Roland, Chief Knight, and unexpectedly, several Sleeping Island witches.

"Your Highness, Iron Axe reporting to you!" He walked forward and saluted the prince.

The prince nodded and said, "Everyone's here. Let's get started." He gave two long guns to Iron Axe and Carter. "It's one of my newly developed weapons, still in the prototype stage. The numbers are limited, so take turns trying them, please."

Iron Axe carefully studied the gun in his hand. It looked similar to a revolving rifle except that it had no cartridge.

This made him wonder if its bullets had to be reloaded through the muzzle like the oldest flintlocks.

"It's called a bolt rifle," His Highness quickly explained. "It uses the newest smokeless gunpowder. The caliber is 8 mm, smaller than the 12 mm of a revolving rifle, but it's more powerful." He turned the gun over to give a demonstration. "The ammunition is inserted from the front of the trigger, and each clip can be

embedded with five bullets. However, it cannot fire continuously like a revolving rifle, so you need to reload it after ejecting all the bullets."

Soon after the prince's demonstration, Iron Axe understood how to operate the new rifle and shot a clip of bullets. The kickback of the rifle was quite strong. Every time the gun was discharged, he felt a heavy kick on his shoulder from the butt, and it was much louder than a revolver.

Five bullets shot out of an old gun would usually cause thick smoke that blocked his sight, but now there was no smoke in front of the muzzle, which might be due to the "smokeless gunpowder" that His Highness had just mentioned. Apart from that, there was nothing special about this new bolt rifle. Iron Axe thought there was a substantial improvement from the flintlock to the revolver, but the bolt rifle seemed to have no improvement and even wasn't as good as a revolver. Its most obvious shortcoming was the low rate of fire.

He could fire continuously while standing with a revolving rifle, but it was inconvenient to do so with the bolt rifle, since he had to reload the gun by hand and then raise it back up to aim at the target again after each shot. Though this process took much less time than a flintlock, it wasn't effective in suppressing the enemy in a short time. For example, it was obviously less practical than a revolver in battles—like the ones against the noble rebels in Longsong Stronghold with close combat in the streets or indoors.

Iron Axe told Roland his honest opinion, and Carter voiced a similar view.

The prince nodded and said, "Yes, it's not as convenient as a revolver, but it also has a great advantage. Andrea, come here and show them." He gave the rifle to the witch and said, "Remember to shoot using your ability."

"Uh-huh." The blonde witch picked up the gun and skillfully reloaded it. They could tell that this was not her first time operating this new weapon. "Now, watch me!"

With three deafening shots, Iron Axe was shocked to see the three farthest wooden targets fall down in turn. Her bullets shot the targets that looked as small as fingernails at the distance, on their thin sticks below the target boards.

They were standing at least 400 meters away!

"Your Highness, it's..." Carter stuttered in disbelief.

"Andrea's derivative ability enables her to accurately hit the target with a gun or a bow," the prince explained with a smile, "but her ability works on neither bullets nor arrows. It only gives her proficiency for using weapons. For example, she'll hit a target ten meters away if she throws a stone at it, but if she throws a bird at it, her ability just won't work."

"You mean... ordinary people can also achieve that kind of proficiency through training?"

"Exactly. The greatest merit of this bolt rifle is its greatly improved shooting range and accuracy. Unlike the guns before, there's no gap between the barrel and the cartridge, so there's no air leak in this new rifle," Roland nodded and answered. "With a telescopic sight on it, any ordinary soldier can use it to precisely shoot down enemies around 400 to 500 meters away, while a revolver can only shoot accurately within 100 meters."

Iron Axe instantly realized why this weapon was so deadly. Most people would never be on guard against attacks from this long distance. If the shooter hid himself inside a residential area or at a higher point, he could easily kill his target. And if the shooter was Lady Nightingale, nobody could survive bullets coming from an invisible source.

"Your Highness, you agreed to give me one when it's put into mass production." Andrea reminded Roland, covering her mouth.

"Of course," Roland said and put the two rifles away. He walked to the other side and removed a cloth covering something. "In fact, bolt rifles are just the beginning. This one is the focus of today's test."

Iron Axe took to the newly unveiled weapon as soon as he saw it. Different from rifles made of steel and wood, this new, black gun seemed to be made of pure metal. It was also bigger than all the other guns. Including the tripod beneath it, it was about half of his height. Its long barrel was half as thick as his wrist. Connected to the big gun, a long, thin piece of cloth carried shining bullets. It was obviously nothing like the guns before in both design and size.

Chapter 475: The Light

"This is a heavy machine gun. It uses the same bullets as a bolt rifle. You can pull a bullet out of this pouch and shoot it from the new rifle," the prince said and patted the big machine gun. "Its mechanism is far more complicated than a rifle, so I won't bother giving you all the unnecessary details. I named it Mark I type HMG. I'll show you how to use it."

He sat behind the firearm and pulled the trigger. What happened next was hard for Iron Axe to comprehend.

All of a sudden, flames shot out of the muzzle, and the strong airflow caused by the gunfire shot the fluffy snow into the air. The strip of bullets seemed to be constantly pulled into the gun. Simultaneously, hot, empty bullet shells were rapidly ejected from the other side one by one. Several dozen shells fell to the ground in just a second.

This machine gun sounded fiercer than a whole team of riflemen in the Flintlock Squad. No pause could be heard between the gunshots. The prince aimed at the ground in front of him instead of the distant targets and shot continuously into the snow. Before the snow in one place could fall back to the ground, the snow in another place was propelled upward, making the snowy ground look like the surface of boiling water. The hail of bullets formed a web of death and anyone attempting to break through it would be riddled with bullets.

"It's, it's amazing," Chief Knight murmured.

Carter was not the only one who was astonished. Iron Axe glanced around and saw that all the witches were dumbfounded, and only Lady Nightingale, who always stayed beside Roland, seemed quite calm. Ashes, the black-haired witch carrying a giant sword, showed a mixture of shock, confusion, and frustration.

Iron Axe could not help but feel the same way. He had become Chief Bodyguard of the Osha Clan because of his proficiency in knife work and archery, skills he had honed with regular practices since childhood. Like him, the most powerful warriors with outstanding talent were popular among clan leaders in the Southernmost Region. However, even the quickest and strongest fighter in the world could never escape these bullets that moved faster than sight. Astoundingly, the Mark I didn't even have the flaw of requiring a pause to reload bullets. If the First Army was equipped with 20 heavy machine guns, the enemy's fighting skills acquired from more than ten years of hard work would become a joke.

A fighter would naturally find it hard to accept the fact.

Fortunately, he found a new path.

Leaf moved rapidly through the heavy undergrowth of plants to drive the demonic beasts that had intruded into the Misty Forest towards the city wall.

Now, she could control an area almost as large as the town. The

trees and foliage in the area were like her eyes and limbs. They could grow according to her will and form a defense line against enemies, but His Highness kept telling her to inform the army whenever she found any demonic beasts or demons instead of directly fighting against them, especially demons. If demons sensed her existence and destroyed the whole forest, it would be a significant loss, as the town now counted on her to provide early warnings, and a forest that could be adjusted on demand was a great asset.

Leaf reclaimed an empty lot near the town and planned to grow "Golden Ones" wheat on it as soon as the Months of Demons ended. This time, with the Heart of Forest to provide her with magic power, the seeds of the wheat would grow continuously and produce enough seeds for all the farmers in the Western Region.

Suddenly, she sensed a group of demonic wolf hybrids approaching from the edge of the forest.

Leaf immediately turned to look at these invaders and saw eight strong demonic beasts fleeing into the deep forest. As she was about to send out a carrier pigeon to inform the First Army and meanwhile drive them to the city wall, she felt something strange.

They did not look as ferocious as usual. Instead, they seemed to be driven by something. Even her branches and vines could not stop them now.

Could it be demons returning?

Leaf frowned, and as she was about to widen her range of sight, she felt a hint of warmth on her head.

She promptly looked up and saw golden rays of light peep out from several cracks in the cloudy sky, shining down on the snowy white land of the Western Region.

"How do I deal with this one here?" Tilly pointed at an equation in a book.

"Well... you put in equation four to create a new equation, and then you'll derive it to get the one in the book." Anna quickly wrote down the derivation process on a piece of scrap paper. "That's it."

"I see." Tilly clapped her hands and said, "If you put this variable in, the result should be close to 1."

"Impressive! You can calculate the result in your mind," Anna gasped with admiration.

"That's just because of my ability. You're the amazing one. You can learn everything in the prince's new books so quickly," said Princess Tilly with a smile.

Anna gave her a soft smile. Only the mention of Roland Wimbledon could bring a smile like that to her face.

Every time Tilly saw that smile, she could not help but think that it was impossible for a simple, honest girl like Anna to like a wicked man. "Roland must be different now," she presumed, regardless of whether he was the real Prince Roland or not. Actually, Tilly herself felt that the new Roland was totally different from all the nobles in this world as if he were from another world. However, at the same time, she felt comfortable around him and liked his unique charm more and more as time went by. Looking up at the cloudy sky, Tilly even hoped for the Months of Demons to continue like this so she could learn all his knowledge. That way, she might be able to truly understand the new Roland, even if he never wanted to talk about himself.

She shook her head to dismiss these thoughts. Tilly pointed to the next question. To her astonishment, the book was suddenly lit up.

The two witches looked out the window simultaneously. Traces of light had mysteriously appeared in the snowy sky, and the long lost sunshine now rimmed the clouds with golden light. The locals bustling about in the town sensed the change, too. Soon, a growing number of people poured into streets, cheering.

Tilly looked at the sky in a daze, all sorts of emotions welling up inside her.

When the gunfire stopped, empty bullet shells were piled up

beside the prince's feet. A dull, light tint of red could be seen on the muzzle of the gun, and white smoke was coming out of the barrel.

Even the drop of a pin could be heard now as nobody aired their opinions. Words were unnecessary since the fixed look on their faces told the shock brought by this new weapon.

Iron Axe could not control his excitement any longer and knelt down in the manner of the Sand Nation.

"The world is yours, Your Highness."

He firmly believed that his new path was to lead the First Army which was equipped with brand new firearms to expand the territory for His Highness Roland.

A hand reached in front of Iron Axe.

The prince pulled him up and did not look as content as Iron Axe had expected. Instead, he looked at the Impassable Mountain Range and said in a deep voice, "Our real enemy is demons."

"Even so, I'll still fight for you until I die." Before Iron Axe could speak his thoughts, a dazzling ray of light pierced the cloudy sky, illuminating the world below. The witches behind exclaimed in amazement, and Roland looked up and smiled. More and more rays of light came down from above and became brighter and brighter. Soon, it was hard for them to stare at the light. Meanwhile, dark clouds silently melted away as the ice did with fire. The sun

appeared again in the sky.

The Months of Demons ended.

Chapter 476: The Victory Day

...

It was still dark outside, and someone had been knocking endlessly on Cacusim's door. He yawned and subconsciously reached out to grab his coat, and then he realized he no longer needed a coat.

The thick brick wall kept the chill away, and the incredible heating made the inside warm. No matter how heavy the snow was outside, the house no longer let the cold in like it used to, and the roof no longer leaked. Such a high-quality house was only fit for the nobles in Valencia. Of course, it was a little smaller.

He opened the door and found a young boy, his assistant Pike, standing outside. "Why aren't you up yet? We have to hurry, Captain! Otherwise, we won't get a good spot!"

"Do we need to leave so early?" Cacusim stuck his head out and looked at the sky. The dawn was peeking through the clouds, and soft morning sunshine lit a small section of the sky.

"Of course!" the boy exclaimed. "My neighbors told me there would be a performance from the Star Flower Troupe during the celebration, and we won't get into the square if we're late!"

"All right, wait a minute." The old man shrugged and returned to his bedroom to change. He looked at the other empty bed and sighed softly. "The Victory Day... Is there any celebration like this

in Longsong Stronghold? If not, Vader would miss it."

They went to the square and found that there were banners strung up on ropes and tied to the trees on both sides of the street. The small town looked bright and new under the morning sunshine. Every now and then, people joined them from the pathways into the main road and walked alongside them. It seemed that they were going to the square too.

Cacusim had heard about the celebration from Pike. The prince had named the first day after the Months of Demons as the Victory Day to celebrate passing the months safely. On that day, everyone in the town had the day off and enjoyed a grand bonfire party in the square. Cacusim's assistant had learned about this and invited him to go to square with him. After some thought, the old man agreed.

As they entered, they found a fenced-in area in the center of the square and policemen with black uniforms maintaining order. Quite a few people had arrived early and were standing around waiting. The two quickly found a place near the stage and chatted as they waited for the celebration to begin.

At noon, crowds gathered in the square and the prince appeared in the center of the theater. As soon as he showed up, Cacusim heard overwhelming cheers. The people around him excitedly raised their hands and shouted, "Long Live Your Highness!"

Prince Roland smiled. He waited for the cheers to pass, raised his fist, and said loudly, "We have defeated evil once again!"

The square exploded in instant cheers, the deafening sound shook the old man's heart. He had not seen such a respected lord in a very long time.

"My people, no matter where you come from, the Western Region, the Northern Region, the Eastern Region or the Southernmost Region, as long as you have made a contribution to our town, the glory belongs to you! This glory belongs to everyone who gave their blood and sweat to Border Town!" The prince's calm, emotional voice seemed to have magic power and could be heard without him having to shout. "Today is the Victory Day. It was set by all of you. Evil has not been completely eliminated and will come back sooner or later, but no matter how many times our enemies come, victory is ours as long as we unite and work together!"

The old man had never heard a nobility refer to the civilians and himself as "we", but His Highness didn't seem to mind. He looked at the people naturally, without arrogance or scorn. In the prince's eyes, he and his subjects were together as one.

It was incredible, but unexpectedly... harmonious.

"Now, let's cheer for this hard-won victory and raise our glasses to celebrate!"

"Long live Your Highness!"

"Long live Victory!"

The cheers rang throughout the square, and the people raised their right hand to show their respect, including Cacusim.

"This is a Lord who is worthy of my loyalty!" Pike said passionately while thumping his chest.

Next, it was the Star Flower Troupe's turn, and many people whistled excitedly.

"We haven't seen their performances in such a long time."

"Ms. Irene is still so beautiful!"

"But compared to Miss May, she still lacks lasting appeal."

"It's Ms. May now. Haven't you heard the news? She's about to marry Chief Knight, and the prince has already sent a wedding gift."

Listening to the people around, Pike asked in wonder, "The name of a troupe is usually either the same as the theater or the name of the town, so why does the troupe of Border Town have such a strange name?"

"You aren't a westerner, are you?" asked someone immediately. "Ms. May and Ms. Irene are both from Longsong Theatre, and Ms. May is called the Star of the Western Region, while Ms. Irene is

called the Flower of Tomorrow. Now, they both live in Border Town, so the troupe's name is Star Flower Troupe."

"Look, it's beginning!"

This was not Cacusim's first time watching theatrical performances, but the story was quite unique. Instead of a normal love story between nobilities, it told the history of the Western Region. The actors played ordinary people living in Border Town. In the beginning, they were helpless, confused, and chased around like lambs during the Months of Demons. Then they decided to stay in the town and fight against the demonic beasts. The whole story was full of twists and turns, which were very gripping. When the characters died from hunger and cold or were killed in the line of defense to protect their families, the audience felt as if they were there.

The old man was quickly captured by the performance, and even people who had just come to the Western Region could feel the sacrifices that citizens of Border Town made and their unremitting efforts for survival.

When the play was finished, a thunderous applause rang above the square.

Cacusim was dumbstruck by what he saw next. A girl with long flaxen hair held a black line in her hand. She cut the wood stage into various parts, and used them to light a giant bonfire.

The crowd wasn't scared by this, and they even chanted her

name. "Miss Anna! Miss Anna!"

As sheep baked on the bonfire, the atmosphere in the square reached its climax. The locals spontaneously stood in a long line and then began to dance strangely, the last part of the celebration. According to the people standing around Cacusim and Pike, as long as the dance continued, the barbecue would continue until midnight.

"Captain, let's go together!" Pike gulped. He was eager to join.

"I'm too old to dance," Cacusim shook his head. "You should join them."

"I'll go then." He stuck out his tongue. "I'll share some barbecue with you when I get it."

Looking at the boy dancing with the crowd, the old man couldn't help but laugh. He had been wondering how to make the name of the Concrete Boat assigned to him memorable and unique, and now he had an idea.

"I'll name it Victory," he thought.

Chapter 477: Love and Affection

...

Just like last year, the witches held the feast in the castle.

Leaf turned the backyard that had been expanded several times into an open-air campsite fenced by olive trees. Around the raging bonfire, the witches could appreciate the starry night sky anytime.

Compared with the last BBQ feast which was only attended by five witches, this one was much more crowded, reaching a total number of 25 witches. All the witches from the Witch Cooperation Association came, along with the seven witches from Sleeping Island, as well as Maggie, Lucia, Agatha, Spear, Paper, and Summer.

Plates of finely cut food and various sauces were put on a small table by the bonfire for the witches to eat freely. After the territories of the rebel nobles were completely cleared, the supply of meat and cloth in Border Town had greatly increased. Also served on the table was the low-alcohol fruit wine brewed by Evelyn, as well as the ice cream provided by Agatha.

While Lightning was enthusiastically demonstrating to the crowd how to grill a chicken foot, Maggie had begun to enjoy a hot-roasted steak. Having spent a year in the mountains and jungles with Lightning, Maggie had got familiar with all sorts of grilled food, and she filled her waist pocket with various spices, just as Lightning did.

"I think this is a waste of time." Agatha smeared honey on the roasted meatballs in her hand. "The demons are bound to attack us, but we're not seizing this precious time to prepare... instead, we're just celebrating the latest victory. When the enemy breaks into our city... everything is done for," she said while chewing the food.

"Take it easy. It'll be OK." Roland handed her a bunch of stuffed beefballs—obviously, she was very fond of the juicy meatballs. "A proper balance of work and rest will increase the work efficiency. Besides, resting for one day won't prevent us from defeating the demons, and even if we lose, at least we've enjoyed the sweetness of life."

"Nonsense!" Agatha said while rolling her eyes. She then took the beefballs and put them over the bonfire after dipping it in a bowl of oil—with the help of her freezing ability, she could keep the meatballs at just the right temperature regardless of the heat from the fire. Clearly, her recent work with the process of cooling nitrogen had helped her to perfect control of her magic powers.

On the other side, the newcomer Summer apparently hadn't seen so much meat in a long time. Although she could not stop swallowing saliva, her hands kept still. Fortunately, after noticing Summer's timidity, Wendy pulled this newly awoken sister to her side and shared the food that she roasted with Summer and Paper.

The three witches from Sleeping Island, Ashes, Andrea and Shavi, began to play poker games while waiting for their food to be grilled. In the past few months, they had learned all the variations

of poker that Roland was familiar with. As long as there was no attack from the demonic beasts, they would get together and play poker in the castle hall.

And the other witches from Sleeping Island, such as Candle, Evelyn and Sylvie, who had got familiar with the witches in the little town, were having a good time talking with Leaf, Echo, Soraya and others, just like a family did.

Looking at the harmonious scene, Roland felt quite gratified—after a year's effort, changes in the Western Region began to emerge. The people's enthusiastic cheers at the square at daytime and the heartfelt smile on the witches' faces were all payback for his efforts.

Such kind of payback was so sweet that Roland could not help but feel intoxicated by it.

As the bonfire gradually died out, the time approached midnight. Roland asked Nightingale and Ashes to escort Nana and Summer home respectively, while he stepped onto the second floor of the castle, waiting for Anna to appear.

He decided to take the initiative instead of waiting passively, or rather, postponing.

Silver moonlight cast into the castle through the corridor window. In the moonlight, Roland saw Anna's blue eyes. The scene was quite familiar to him, but their positions were reversed from the last time. Half hidden in darkness, Anna's pupils reflected a

faint luster, like stars in the night sky where all the other stars could not be seen. The sky only belonged to her tonight.

Roland did not speak, but walked forward. Holding Anna's hand, they went to the third floor.

This was not the first time that Roland had kept this close to Anna, but still, his heart beat fiercely. Through the hand he was holding, he could tell Anna was nervous too. Nevertheless, she followed him without any hesitation.

They entered Roland's bedroom. When Roland closed the door, turned around, took a deep breath, and wondered what to say, Anna kissed him.

The tip of her tongue softly pried open Roland's mouth. Roland felt lost in her luscious breath.

At that moment, the title of a song popped into his mind, Sealed with a Kiss.

When you don't know what to say, kiss; when you've no idea how to express your feelings, kiss. Kissing is the speech without a sound and kissing is scorching affection.

When their lips finally parted, Anna's cheeks had turned red.

"I have a present for you."

From his pocket, Roland took out two red Magic Stones, which had been polished, rimmed with gold and strung together by a thin, red thread at the top.

"Is this... a Sigil?"

"Yes. After being connected together by magic power, a Stone of Pathfinding and a Stone of Positioning make a Tracking Sigil." Roland helped Anna to put the Stone of Pathfinding around her neck. "Now no matter where I go, you can find me with the help of the stones."

Anna must have sensed something unusual because she stared at Roland, motionless.

Just then, Roland carefully spoke each word while softly holding her cheeks with his hands, "Will you marry me, Anna?"

The peacefulness of the clear blue lake was interrupted by a pouring rain.

After a long pause, Anna nodded and said, "Yes."

...

What followed next was so natural—the long held emotions broke through the last barrier at that very moment and entangled

with one another.

Roland picked her up by the waist and put her on to the bed. He kissed her from her forehead down to her neck with tenderness, and clumsily unsnapped her buttons. With her eyes open, Anna stared at Roland as if she wanted to imprint every single move of his into her brain.

When the girl's fair and smooth body was exposed, Roland hugged her gently in his arms and covered them up with a quilt.

Without the barrier of clothes, he clearly felt Anna's rhythmic heartbeat, as if her heart was about to pop out of her chest.

"This time..." Anna whispered in Roland's ear.

"What about it?"

"I won't fall asleep again..."

Roland couldn't help but burst into laughter, which eased the tension between them. He lightly brushed her nose and said, "Even if you fall asleep, I won't leave you alone."

Their mouths searched for each other once again, their bodies became one, and their hearts merged together.

...

Chapter 478: Witnessing the Establishment of the New City

After m*king love, Anna rested her head in Roland's arms and nuzzled up against him like a cat.

"Your Highness, it's so good... to have met you," she whispered to him. Her breathing had just returned to normal from all the excitement.

"Call me Roland." He stroked her long hair and smiled. "There isn't anyone else around anyway, and I've never heard you call my name."

"Ro... land."

"Good girl." He tickled her ears until she laughed, and then he exclaimed, "Actually... it's me who should have said that. In the past, I never imagined that I would meet such a brilliant girl like you."

"Not even in the palace?"

"No." Roland shook his head faintly. "Sometimes, I even think I'm dreaming."

Anna remained silent for a while, and then cuddled closer to Roland before saying, "I'm right here and I'm not going anywhere."

These words aroused his thoughts. He recalled that she had said the same thing to him before.

"...living like a normal person, but I do not care about that. I just want to stay at Your Highness' side, nothing more."

"What are you talking about? I'm not going anywhere."

She's the petite and frail lass who was rolled up in a corner of a prison cell, the diligent girl who practiced her ability in maids clothes, the daring young lady who conjured a huge fire and sealed up the city wall, the diffident maid who raised her head and kissed me, and the lovely young woman who asked me to accompany her on the Day of Awakening...

Such scenes flashed in front of Roland one after another.

Without realizing it, the two of them had built up so many memories together.

"... it's true." He slid his hand down Anna's silky hair and caressed her slender back. "You're right here with me."

"Feelings are really intriguing," he thought to himself. "Though these are nothing but meaningless and silly words, they warm and melt my heart like nothing else can."

An even longer period of silence followed. Then, just as he thought she had fallen asleep, she spoke,

"I'm a witch."

"I know."

"Sister Wendy told me that witches are infertile," Anna muttered.
"This will be troublesome for you."

"I'm not afraid," Roland replied assertively. "Compared to the impending third Battle of Divine Will, this is nothing." He once spent time considering how to arrange his succession, but discontinued it after hearing Agatha's report. The battle that would decide Man's fate was around the corner. All kingdoms would be completely decimated if they were unable to defeat the demons. Compared to this, the succession issue was not important.

He paused momentarily when he thought of this. After a while, he continued, "Actually, I was a bit worried earlier on."

"About what?"

"I was worried that you would use this reason to reject me."

"Why?" Anna looked puzzled. "I want to be with you, no matter I'm a witch or not."

Roland guffawed when he heard her reply. "Indeed, since I met Anna, she's always been like that... straightforward, never beating around the bush, and expressive of whatever idea she had. With her, there would never be a Korean drama case of 'I mean well for you, but I can't tell you' misunderstanding. I've thought too much."

As they chatted, Roland began to feel his body revitalize. Sensing the changes, Anna kissed him on the neck and climbed on top of him...

The night was still very young.

...

The next day, Roland woke up much later than usual. When he opened his eyes, the sun was already directly above the castle.

He looked beside himself and was slightly shocked. Anna was nowhere to be found. "Could it be that... what happened last night was merely a dream?" He bent his body down and breathed a sigh of relief. Strands of flaxen hair were left on the pillow, and he could smell a faint fragrance on one side of his clothes.

"What're you doing?" Anna's voice suddenly came from overhead.

Roland raised his head and felt awkward—he must have looked unglamorous sniffing all around while lying on the pillow. "Ahem,

I was just counting the strands of hair you left. Hey, when did you get up?"

"I went to bring breakfast to you." She placed the plate she was holding on the bedside table. Her actions and movements seemed a little unlike her usual self. "I saw you sleeping soundly when I woke up and didn't want to disturb you."

"Sorry," Roland said apologetically, "I should have helped." After so many physical activities during the night, Roland feared that she was feeling uncomfortable despite her exceptional recovery capabilities.

"What nonsense." Anna laughed meekly. "You're a prince."

He shook her head and did not say one more word. Instead, he pulled her into his arms. After embracing for a while, she patted him on the back. "Alright, that's enough. Since you're awake, hurry up and eat your breakfast. I still have work to do today."

"Shouldn't you rest for a few more days?"

"That won't do," Anna replied earnestly. "We have to face the demons soon. Miss Soraya and Miss Agatha are working really hard, and thus it won't be right for me to slack off." She smiled sweetly. "You too... Roland."

...

After kissing goodbye to Anna, the prince strode to his office in buoyant mood. When he pushed open the door, he was surprised to see Tilly waiting for him and sitting by the table.

"Good morning." he greeted. "Is there an issue?"

"Look, it's already noon." Tilly smiled back at him. "And you look like you had a good dream."

"Do, do I?" Roland placed a hand around his mouth.

"Of course, you're all smiles today." She shrugged her shoulders and the smile on her face disappeared. "This time I came to say goodbye to you."

Roland was stunned. "Goodbye? Are you returning to Sleeping Island?"

"I've stayed here for too long. Even though I've kept in touch with the Fjords by letter, but... I've to go back sooner or later. Now that the Months of Demons are over, the objective of my trip can be considered done." She stood up and walked over to the French window. "Don't worry. Even though I'll be across the sea, I'll give you my full support in fighting the church and the demons."

"Can't you settle here in the Western Region?" Roland made a last-ditch attempt to persuade her to stay. There's a huge amount of vacant land on the south bank of the Redwater River. It can accommodate all of the witches."

"We've discussed this before." Tilly sighed lightly. "This is not a problem of finding residence."

"It seems like she has made up her mind," Roland reckoned. Though he understood that the decision was a sign of her political maturity and responsibility as a leader, he was very unhappy about it. "At least stay for another week. I'll prepare a few useful things for the witches in the Fjords."

"Oh?" Tilly turned and faced him. "What are they?"

"Books, courseware, and a few exercises." He said while flicking his fingernails. "This will not only save you the trouble of making copies but also enhance their learning effectiveness. Also, I'll pack a few revolvers. These can be used for self-protection in case you encounter enemies equipped with the God's Stone of Retaliation. There'll also be two steam engines which can be used to pump water for irrigation and salt extraction."

"I see..." Tilly turned away and said. "Thank you very much."

"And there's the Groundbreaking Day." Roland said, emphasizing every word. "I hope that on that day, you can join me in witnessing the establishment of City of Neverwinter."

Chapter 479: Choice of Nightingale's Heart

Recently, Wendy spent her life in an exceptionally fulfilling way.

True to her name, Paper had quickly absorbed the knowledge regarding witches and magic power. She made great progress in learning how to read and write as well as knowledge about the natural world. At present, she was already able to learn new vocabularies on her own. There was only a bit of concern about her tutoring. On occasions, she would raise questions that even Wendy could not answer, and that meant either Anna or Roland had to be consulted.

Compared to Paper, Summer's progress was much slower. This was perhaps a matter of age. Every word had to be recited a few times to her before she could remember its spelling. Furthermore, she seemed confused by natural knowledge. But Wendy was okay with it. After all, what she did not lack at the moment was time and patience. In fact, it would be more problematic for her if her students were all as smart as Anna.

Every morning, she would call her two students into the living room to go through the homework that was assigned the day before. This was in line with what His Highness had told all of the Department of Education's teachers: The knowledge that was learned without practicing would be forgotten quickly, and only through regular practice would the knowledge be committed to memory. Wendy agreed very much with this statement.

The next lesson was practicing magic power. For this, Paper could assist Agatha to produce acid, or go to the shipyard to help in

accelerating the hardening of cement. Hence, Wendy mainly tutored the newcomer, Summer. She had heard that Summer would soon be joining Nightingale in the Security Bureau and help His Highness to recreate crime scenes. Thus, the most important thing to learn was how to precisely control the reversal of time.

Fortunately, using magic ability was as natural as breathing to witches. Even the slowest students could not go very wrong once they felt the operation of magic. Wendy often raised the example of Maggie in order to encourage Summer not to be disheartened by her lack of natural proficiency in magic power. If even a pigeon was able to evolve, surely a regular witch could also do so? Of course, after that, she would secretly bring a few pieces of honey roast meat to Maggie as compensation.

Elementary classes were conducted in the evenings. In consideration of the different learning paces of incoming students, His Highness had sorted the Witch Union into two classes. The early comers would continue to receive lessons from Scroll and also begin to learn knowledge about elementary physics and chemistry, while the new arrivals would receive extra tuition from Wendy after their usual lessons.

This was the most relaxing part of Wendy's day.

As the earliest witch from the Witch Cooperation Association to join the Union, she had increased the gulf between herself and the other top-scoring sisters after a period of learning. She would feel a great amount of pressure on her shoulders whenever she remembered that His Highness had conferred on her the role of manager of the Association.

Only while teaching the newcomers did she feel free and able to put her heart and soul into the tutoring.

After assigning homework to the two students, Wendy went to have a hot bath. When she returned comfortably to her bedroom, she was surprised to see Nightingale sitting by her bed and dazing while holding a copy of Natural Science Theoretical Foundation.

She's definitely dazing. If she was focusing on the book, she would have fallen asleep within minutes.

"What's the matter?" Wendy uncovered her quilt and climbed on to the bed, sitting next to Nightingale.

The latter shifted her head slightly and briefly glanced at Wendy, who gasped when seeing Nightingale's vacant expression. Wendy had seen such an expression on Nightingale's face only in Silver City, which was the first time they met. At that time, Nightingale was walking alone spiritlessly through the snowy streets, in complete disregard of the snowflakes that fell on her shoulders.

"His Highness Roland's together with Anna already..." she muttered, "and it was I who encouraged him."

"..." Wendy was at a loss for words. She had also noticed that Anna and His Highness had grown closer recently, but this was acknowledged by everyone and thus it was not surprising. Anna was the first witch that His Highness met, and was impeccable in all respects. Apart from her inability to give birth, she was

considered by Scroll to be the most suitable person to be Queen. The only surprising thing was that the recent development was facilitated by Nightingale.

"I had made preparations and knew that this would be the outcome. Yet, seeing them together, why... why do I feel so painful?" Nightingale grasped Wendy's hand tightly. "I'd resolved about this long ago..."

Wendy also began to feel bad as she looked at Nightingale's appearance. Her deepest impression of Nightingale was her strength and courage. Whether it was stabbing and capturing her own distant relative in Silver City, or fighting against the church, she was able to keep her cool and fight on despite the difficult circumstances. She even showed no sign of fear while facing the menacing Cara. Yet, on this relationship matter, she once again became a helpless child. And Wendy was unable to provide any help.

There's no right or wrong with regard to feelings.

All that Wendy could do was to embrace her and pat gently on her shoulders. "If you feel bad, cry it all out and you'll be fine."

Nightingale shook her head in disagreement and mumbled. "Since I left the Gilen family, I vowed... never to cry again, never again..." Her voice progressively lowered until she became inaudible. Wendy gradually felt a warm and moist feeling in her bosom, but even so, Nightingale did not make a whimper. Because she was restraining herself greatly, her shoulders began to shudder and she held on to Wendy even more forcefully.

"I didn't cry..."

"Yes, you didn't.... I know." Wendy closed her eyes and started to regret what she had once said to Nightingale. Staying around His Highness was a simple solution. In fact, the majority of witches would choose to stay around him... because they did not have anywhere else to go. They were also aware that there was only a minimal chance that Roland would accept and marry a girl who could not give birth and thereby could not carry on his bloodline. However, the problem with staying around him was the distance. Just like with the sun, anyone can bask in the warmth and glory of the sunshine, yet it was easy to get burned if one tried to move closer. And Nightingale's intention was obviously not to gaze at him from a distance.

This was not an easy road to follow.

"How about giving up?" Wendy asked softly. "If you take a step back, you'll still have the sisters to accompany you."

The ensuing long silence made time appear to freeze. Wendy felt as though she was awaiting a trial, and even though she was not the defendant, it was still extremely difficult for her to bear. A few times, she almost opened her mouth to ask more questions, but her words would slip back just before she said anything.

This continued until Nightingale raised her head.

Her eyes appeared slightly red, but tears could not be seen—the

wetness on Wendy's bosom seemed to be her own false perception. Seeing the expression in Nightingale's eyes, Wendy could tell that there was a conclusion to this trial... but it was not the end.

"I won't give up." Nightingale shook her head and said, "No matter what, I'll stay beside him until the very end..."

She did not mind being burnt to ashes by the sun.

This was her answer.

Chapter 480: The Wedding

Three days later, the wedding of Chief Knight Lannis Carter and Star of the Western Region May was held on castle grounds.

Besides family members, there were also members from the Star Flower Troupe, the City Hall and the Witch Union.

In this age, a wedding ceremony was always witnessed by the church. Weddings of royal families and the nobility were witnessed by a regional Bishop, while nobles and businessmen High Priest or Priestess. Ordinary citizens needed to go to the church by themselves and pay several silver royals to ask the Priest to preside over the wedding. Of course, people who could not afford it just lived together unwed.

Since there was no church in the Western Region, the City Hall was the wedding witness. Roland planned for the City Hall to dispatch officers to issue marriage certificates and do the registration for free. Carter's wedding would be a great role model —he had already thought of the slogan, "Convenient, legitimate and free of charge".

When the bride appeared in her wedding gown, everyone was impressed. She was not a witch, yet she was a big star, and this drew crowds. Even Roland had to admit that Carter had a good eye. If it were not for the publicity and pleading from the knight, Roland would not have shown the wedding gown.

Dressed in his handsome black attire, the bridegroom Carter

Lannis looked extraordinary. The two of them standing together were like a heaven-made match.

"They look so great together." Anna said.

"We'll have our day eventually," Roland squeezed her hands gently and said, "by then, everyone will know you."

"Mmm." She smiled sweetly.

Marrying a witch was easy, however, getting the recognition of subjects was difficult. It could only be achieved by those with absolute might and great prestige. Hence, the most fundamental thing was to subside the civil war within the kingdom and become the only king of Graycastle. After that, he could marry Anna—he did not want others to think that Anna was his hidden plaything, like previous nobles.

However, Roland believed that it would not be too long. Since the Months of Demons had finished, the town was fully preparing for the coming spring attack. Soon, there would be a fierce attack and Timothy's throne would be destroyed completely.

"The rings, please. Er, next..." The officer from the City Hall was unfamiliar with the new wedding process written by Roland. He lowered his head to look at his notebook, "you may kiss each other now."

"Wow!" Assembled guests broke into a round of applause,

especially Irene, a member of the Star Flower Troupe. She excitedly grabbed Morning Light and swayed from side to side, and then grabbed others to clap and cheer for May.

"Just kissing," Lightning twitched her mouth, "each time, my father returned from an expedition, he was kissed several times."

"Coo..." Squatting on Lighting's head, Maggie turned her head away. She put her wings in front of her face, however, the eyes of a pigeon are on both sides of the head.

"Is this wedding procedure really suitable, Your Highness?" Scroll put her hands on her forehead.

"It's a particular case. Not every couple needs to do this," Roland smiled. "After all, it's used for publicity, the more attractive, the better." Speaking of this, he turned to Soraya. "You need to paint this moment in detail!"

"Rest assured, leave it to me." The latter watched the two newlyweds without blinking, the Magic Pen in her hands was shining.

Carter was obviously nervous. After his initial shock had subsided, May stood on tiptoe and kissed him.

Applause broke out in the yard.

"Please welcome His Highness. He'll give his blessing!"

Roland left the crowd and joined the newlyweds. He patted Carter's shoulder and said, "Well done." Then he turned to May, "May you be forever happy."

"That, that's it?" Carter hesitated.

"Of course! Now go home and rest. I'll give you two days off." Roland smiled. "Vader should arrive in the town this afternoon. Leave your work to him."

"Thank you, Your Highness," the newlyweds answered in harmony, smiling at each other.

The wedding ended in the sounds of fireworks, which were simulated by Echo.

In the afternoon, Barov and Karl came to the castle office to report the progress of the Three Supplies Project to Roland.

"So far, the water supply equipment has been installed in all the living quarters and more than half of the heating pipes have been laid," Karl said. He pointed to the town planning map and continued, "but the power supply will need more time. Except the factory district under your guidance will complete the installation soon, the four residential areas are still in the phase of trenching and slotting. After you went to Longsong Stronghold, this part of the work almost stagnated."

Roland nodded and knew they could do nothing about it. No one other than him understood what a circuit was or how electricity operated. Maybe in April, possibly May, all the townspeople would have electric lighting. Roland said, "It doesn't matter. Now that the Months of Demons is over, the heating can wait for some time. Next, the most important thing is the power supply program and the building of Kingdom Main Street. The former concerns the efficiency of time use, and the latter is the key to strengthen the relationship between the two areas once the city building is completed." He continued, "In addition, don't dismiss the redundant workers after finishing the construction of Kingdom Main Street. We need them to build the road to the shoal."

"Do you mean the spot towards the southern mountain area?"

"That's right. It'll be the entrance to the sea." Roland affirmed. After Tilly and her group returned to Sleeping Island, Lotus would come back to the Western Region. At that time, with the help of Countess Spear, it would take less time to break a new path in mountains. "In addition, once the City of Neverwinter is established, these redundant workers will be my subjects and I want to confer citizenship on them as soon as the construction of Kingdom Main Street is finished." He turned to Barov, "I'll leave it to you."

"Yes, my lord!"

"Don't stop the construction of communities. You can expand them to the space between the town and Stronghold or the south bank of the Redwater River. The population expansion remains to be a major priority, and I want to triple the urban population by

the end of the year."

Barov sucked in a breath. "My lord, that will be close to 100,000 people."

"I believe we can afford them in the Western Region," Roland said with a deep voice, "you can take it as your goal."

Indeed, the Kingdom of Graycastle had population potential. A big city of 20,000 inhabitants could afford a suburban population of at least 100,000. The more prosperous a city was, the bigger scale the latter was—this phenomenon could also be seen in modern agriculture. There was no limit in the Western Region, plus since the steam engine had come into use, there was no need to have so many people working on the material supply.

"Lastly, since electric lighting is now available in the factory district, you'll need to switch to working eight hours a day in three shifts once the city construction is completed, especially the ammunition processing department," the prince said to the supervisor of the City Hall, "The salary of each shift should be calculated according to the past daily wage. The more they do, the more they get. You can promote it from now on and I hope the factory can operate constantly until we unify Graycastle."

"Yes, Your Highness." Barov answered and made a bow.

Chapter 481: The City of Neverwinter

On the designated Groundbreaking Day, Roland got up very early.

He shaved the stubble on his face, tied up his long gray hair with a simple band, and used a small pair of scissors to trim his brows. After a year of living in this world, he was very experienced in grooming himself and did not need a maid's help.

Looking at his blurry reflection in the silver mirror, he felt that he somehow had the divine manner of a reclusive Taoist priest, if he put on a wide robe.

Roland nodded in satisfaction and left for his office.

There was Barov waiting for him in the room.

"Your Highness," he said with a bow, "a flying messenger has already been sent to Longsong Stronghold and will probably arrive at the Stronghold castle in half an hour."

"Uh-huh, is the venue set up?"

"It was all completed by yesterday afternoon, and right now it seems enough to hold the entire population of the town," replied the City Hall Director.

"Great job." praised Roland, and he slowly walked to the window.

The Impassable Mountain Range and the Misty Forest in the distance were still blanketed in white, and the rising sun scattered rays of golden light onto the snow. He saw moving figures on nearby town streets heading for the rubble city wall area in the West of the town.

As a defense line against demonic beasts last year, this rubble city wall that was hastily constructed with concrete played a principal role in the fight. However, it had now become a border between the inner and outer areas of the town. Roland didn't like this kind of clear separation between the rich and the poor, so he decided to tear it down sooner or later, except the symbolic gap area and gate tower. However, before that, he could still utilize it. He chose the middle section of the rubble city wall as the site for the Groundbreaking event since it could hold far more people than the square.

According to his plan, in order to strengthen the impact of the Groundbreaking event on citizens of both cities, Longsong Stronghold would hold a Groundbreaking announcement at the same time, which would be synchronized by flying messengers. When the first messenger reached Petrov, Roland would step on to the stage to give a speech.

"Right now, the gray falcon carrying the news must be soaring among the mountains and over the Redwater River, with a paper slip fastened to its claw as usual," thought Roland, "but it doesn't know the significance of the news it's carrying. From the moment it lands, Border Town and Longsong Stronghold will become

history."

"Let's go." He collected his thoughts and turned around.

"Yes, Your Highness," Barov said with a smile.

...

Petrov Hull walked slowly onto the constructed wooden stage and looked around.

There were not that many people on the square, at least not as many as during the oatmeal distribution last week.

This was not surprising, since people were mainly only concerned with food and clothes. Compared to the free oatmeal, a Groundbreaking ceremony would not matter that much.

It even seemed rather unnecessary to Even Petrov himself.

The Months of Demons had ended, but the City Hall still did not receive as many applications for job as they had expected. The notice calling for handymen and construction workers was put up a week ago, but the number of recruits hadn't even reached half of the target amount. Meanwhile, Rats seemed to rise back from the ashes, as the police department received more and more reports every day and only verifying these reports was a painstaking amount of work. His friend Rene Medde complained to him that the arresting team needed twice the men to handle its workload.

This actually met Petrov's expectations.

The people were just like that, lazy, greedy, and unintelligent... His Highness spent so much time and efforts on them, but what could he get in return? The thing confused him the most was that Roland Wimbledon was clearly a member of the royal family, so where did that strange confidence in the people come from?

No matter what, he was firmly tied to the prince's chariot, so all he could do was to follow him faithfully.

An eagle cawed in the distance, and a gray figure appeared in the sky.

Petrov opened his prepared speech draft.

...

"Your Highness, it's almost the time." Barov reminded.

The sun had risen halfway into the sky, and the sundial's shadow pointed to nine o'clock. Roland nodded and walked to the tower railing. As soon as the people saw the prince, their chatter turned into warm cheers, and they all raised their hands to create waves throughout the crowd.

Area on both sides of the city wall was packed by a dense crowd

of over 20,000 people, which meant that most of the town's residents were gathered here. Roland was glad that he was not holding this Groundbreaking ceremony in the central square, since it obviously could not offer enough space for such a huge, excited crowd.

He waved his hands to silence the cheers. "Greetings, my subjects."

Echo's magnifying ability allowed his voice to reverberate over the entire town.

"I believe you already know what's about to happen today. This small town, which was built for the North Slope Mine, is soon about to become a real city."

"In the past, the Months of Demons was a nightmare for Border Town, and everyone had to escape to Stronghold for shelter. Now, we have built a strong base here. Osmond Ryan, who wanted to ruin the Western Region, has fallen; the church, which wanted to harm witches and enslave the people, has been banished from this land; even Timothy Wimbledon, who dared to attempt to destroy me, failed—even if he set the entire Southern and Eastern Regions on fire, the town would still be safe and sound. I'm sure the refugees who fled here know this best."

Roland's words were quickly met with the crowd's responses.

"That's right. He burned down the Eagle City and plundered the Port of Clearwater!"

"The new king cleaned out Valencia. His knights acted no differently from burglars, sometimes even worse!"

"He took away my son, saying he needed to join the King's City guards. Heavens... he's only fifteen!"

The prince reached out his hand to quiet them. "And these tragedies will never happen again. This is why the new city is being built! Only by uniting more people, can we face our evil enemies and show them the consequences of their recklessness." He paused. "And this is my city, too. I vow that Roland Wimbledon will never leave any of his people behind, and even if the Kingdom of Graycastle is united, he'll never leave this place!"

A wave of cheers erupted at the foot of the city wall.

"Your Highness, you..." Barov exclaimed from behind him.

Roland waved his hand to silence him. "That's right. This will become the new capital of the Kingdom of Graycastle, and the kingdom will be reborn! I believe that even if an endless winter arrived, this city would still be as warm as spring!" He paused for a while and raised his right hand. "From this day on, Border Town and Longsong Stronghold will become one, and its name will be..."

"Long live the City of Neverwinter!"

"Long live, long live the City of Neverwinter!"

Everyone became excited, and the deafening chants rang through the sky. A mist of snow erupted on the mountainside, and the echoes rolled endlessly through the peaks...

Roland looked at the cheering subjects and felt a great anticipation growing inside him. The sparks of revolution had been ignited, and one day, he would see these sparks turn into a giant flame that would engulf the entire land.

Chapter 482: Zero's Will

The upper level of the Pivotal Secret Temple was brightly lit up with dozens of Magic Stones that made the circular library as bright as day. When one was in this room, it was difficult to believe that it was underground.

This area was equivalent to the Tower of Babel of the Hermes Cathedral above ground, and it was Zero's favorite place. She could easily see all of the Pivotal Secret Area through the window. Watching over the figures bustling around the God's Stone of Punishment Pillar like ants, she felt a great joy in having control over all of these lives. It was as if she was the Lord of the Kingdom of God, and the people walking slowly in the dark were the believers that built the kingdom.

When she had free time, she would take a book containing the history and secrets of the Union from a shelf and read it by the window. Of course, she also had to have a cup of black tea with coltsfoot in it next to her.

After she became the Pope, Zero was actually more relaxed. She did not worry about the impending Battle of Divine Will, but looked forward to it. After more than 200 years, her life had become quite dull, and the Senior Demons that were recorded to be unbeatable seemed like exciting opponents. "I wonder if I take them into the Soul Battlefield, will they still be as fearless and terrifying as they appear?"

However, this battle was still years away, so she needed to set a new goal for herself to pass the time.

There were few people Zero concerned, and Roland Wimbledon happened to be one of them... he was the only mortal to interest her so far.

He was belittled by everyone, but he came out on top after the Royal Decree on the Selection of Crown Prince, fighting extremely well with his tiny territory against two strong contenders for the throne. This was undoubtedly very rare. Also, she discovered some interesting clues in Garcia's memories.

The Queen of Clearwater once placed a maid next to Prince Roland to feed him a deadly poison, but it completely failed, and then the furious queen executed the unlucky alchemist who made the poison. However, Zero had a member of the Secret Pivotal Area replicate the poison according to the recipe in her memories, and the product turned out to be just as the alchemist had promised. It was odorless, colorless, soluble in water, deadly upon intake and incurable.

"So, did the maid deceive Garcia, or is the current Roland Wimbledon not the same Prince Roland as before?" According to the information she had gathered, Zero was more inclined to the second guess. "The question is... if he isn't Prince Roland, who is he? Why no one doubted his identity before?" The more she pondered on this issue, the more intrigued she became. He was able to change his ways to earn the love of all his subjects, single-handedly redistribute the power in the Western Region, and make both the church's emissary delegation and crazed army disappear... If such a man was simply the lord of a small territory, it would really be a pity.

Thus, Roland Wimbledon had to be included as a member of the church, or in other words, become part of her. Zero could not help but lick her lips. It was also why she changed the sequence of attack. If her guesses were correct, then conquering the Kingdom of Graycastle would bring in more benefits than she could imagine.

Of course, as a lord with great authority, he would stay behind the lines during battles, so it was important to figure out how to force him out.

Just as Zero was contemplating how to avoid the direct battle and go straight to Roland, Isabella pushed open the library door and walked in.

"Is the meeting over?"

"Yes." She rubbed her neck. "Lucky you, sitting here reading and sipping tea all day, while I have to lie to those old men... no, it's actually one old man and two madmen."

"It's not simply lying. It concerns the operations of the church's lower level," Zero said with a shrug. "Although witches are the actual core of the church, without these men, we wouldn't be able to collect so many resources to achieve our ultimate goal."

"Whatever." Isabella yawned. "Anyways, they said that we have to wait until the second month of this summer for the resources to attack the Kingdom of Dawn to be relocated to the battle against the Kingdom of Graycastle, and even this is an optimistic estimate."

"This amount of time isn't too long, but it isn't short either," thought Zero, "so the wait will both be torturous and make the reward even more enjoyable." "How's the pill production going?"

"I think there are about 300,000 to 400,000 pills in storage right now," replied Isabella. "But do you really plan to send all the civilians to battle against the demons? Millions of people would completely exhaust all of Hermes's resources. Also..."

"Also what?"

"Also we might not win." She shook her head. "There are so many people that they'll cause trouble no matter where we place them. Not to mention, their days are numbered after they eat the first pill, so what if the demons don't attack us in time? If we feed too few, then they're useless; if we feed too many, we might waste them. Even if the demons all attack at once and are defeated by the crazed army, these people won't be able to fight anymore."

"You don't understand." Zero stood up, walked over to a large table, and lifted the cover off of it, revealing a map of the Wild Places. "I never planned to use the crazed army to protect Hermes, and the location for the final battle should be somewhere on the Fertile Plains... I think it'll probably take place at the ruins of the Holy City of Taquila, since it's closest to us." She pointed at a spot on the map.

"Do you want to... initiate an attack?" Isabella froze in shock.

"We're desperately lacking time," said Zero calmly. "I've never dreamed of completely wiping out the demons. The Holy Book says that only when the Bloody Moon arrives and the Gates of Hell open can the demons build a black spire. Actually, the spire isn't built... it grows."

"Are you saying that those stones are actually alive?" Isabella asked in disbelief.

"This information can only be found in the personal notes of the Union's Three Chiefs... the demons' expansion depends on the black spire's ability to produce Red Mist, and currently spires are founded in areas with many God's Stone mineral veins, so their range of influence will continue to grow. In the beginning of the Second Battle of Divine Will, an Extraordinary once led a division of soldiers to approach the Red Mist area underground, and they found a startling sight—an enormous monster was writhing under the spire, and its body was even larger than the Taquila tower itself," Zero said slowly. "That enormous monster was decomposing God's Stone and turning it into black crystals, which gave off Red Mist. Considering the demons had Chaos Beasts that turned God's Stones into Magic Stones, it wasn't difficult to comprehend that they also had this kind of ability."

"..." Isabella opened her mouth and finally spat. "That's disgusting."

"Unfortunately, once the spire is formed, small surprise attacks will be ineffective, so our best bet is to attack them directly. I don't know how long it takes for the decomposed God's Stone to grow out of the ground, but it probably doesn't happen overnight."

During this time, demons can only transport Red Mist from their backup resources, so they'll have very limited strength. We need to use a crazed army that is large enough to defeat the demons to create a path, so the God's Punishment Army can kill the underground monster," said Zero with great conviction. "If we're lucky enough, we'll buy ourselves another 400 years."

Chapter 483: The Distance to God (Part I)

Isabella stared at the map in silence for a while. "But the crazed soldiers aren't God's Punishment Warriors. Although the pills can affect their resolve, it won't give them unbreakable resolve. In front of truly terrifying enemies, they'll still be afraid and may even run away—millions of defecting soldiers are enough to run us all over into dust."

"Obviously it won't be that simple. It would be best if the crazed army mostly consists of the church's lower level believers, and if the Judgment Army was the core." Zero returned to the window. "And if we want these many believers, we must unite the Four Kingdoms."

"What are our chances of winning?"

"30%? 50%?" she replied nonchalantly. "How can I know what our chances of winning are? After all, we've never fought against them and can only get the information through ancient books from 400 years ago. Don't forget what I said before... if we're lucky enough."

This was exactly why it was so exciting—she was putting the fate of all mankind at stake and placing the few bargaining chips she had all in one basket by fighting the strong with the weak... in a battle where the odds were against them, an unexpected triumph would be all the more sweeter.

"The continuation of mankind will depend on their courage,

wisdom, faith, and sacrifice in this battle," she thought. "This is probably what God hopes to see... cowards can't earn his smile."

"I hope you're right." Isabella frowned. "I'm feeling more curious now."

"Curious about what?"

"If Prince Roland of the Kingdom of Graycastle was standing here, what would he do?"

Zero furrowed her brows. "Why? Do you think he can beat me?"

"Bishop Tayfun said that he hasn't heard from the Pure Witch he sent to the Kingdom of Graycastle yet, as if she simply disappeared. She was the one you assigned on the mission to check out the Western Region. Besides her, we also lost Aphra from King's City, the Bishop candidate Mira, and the church in Longsong Stronghold..." Isabella paused for a bit. "Don't you think since the church began targeting the Four Kingdoms, we've never suffered so many losses before? It's as if after we got involved with the Western Region, we have been losing. It's like... God is protecting him."

"Enough!" Zero slammed her fist on the table. "You know nothing about God!"

Isabella was slightly shocked. "I was only kidding... since when did you care so much about God?"

Zero tried to repress her anger. "He's merely a mortal! Mortals can only rely on calculations and knowledge, and this will all become part of me. Even though he has ways to fight the demons, the Union will definitely do better!" Zero turned around and stared at Isabella. "When the church's troops march into the Kingdom of Graycastle, you'll know who really has God's blessing."

As Isabella left the library, she sighed and said, "You're becoming more and more like a... Pope."

Zero sat silently next to the table, her emotions in tumult for a long time, which was uncommon throughout her 200 years of life.

She knew what Isabella meant, but she could not explain herself to her... no matter who was Pope, no matter what ideas they had before, as soon as they stepped into the Prayer Room, they would all undergo unpredictable changes.

God... really exists.

Zero realized that her thoughts had been completely disturbed, so she closed her book and walked to the top floor of the library.

It was the highest point of the Pivotal Secret Temple where the Prayer Room was.

Zero pushed open a secret door made out of bookshelves, walked up a narrow stone staircase, and entered a windowless room. The

room was only a few square feet, not even enough for someone to lie down in. The roof was cone-shaped and encrusted with Magic Stones that gave off a faint blue light. Under the dim lighting, Zero could vaguely see the four walls and hard ground. Besides these, there was nothing in the room, and it was hard to believe that this stuffy and cramped place was the closest location to God.

Zero closed her eyes to feel his summoning.

Her dark world slowly began to change, as if something entered her mind and displayed a scene in her consciousness—she knew that this wasn't a figment of her imagination. Even her soul, which had absorbed hundreds of people, could not see or even imagine such a sight.

When the twisting lines slowed down, five large paintings appeared in the expansive world... one floated above her head in a giant ring, and the other four lined up symmetrically in a cross next to her.

This was a sign from God.

Watching something in her mind was an incredible feeling. Zero knew that this entire scene would disappear as soon as she opened her eyes, so she could only use her consciousness to view every painting—when she was focused on the paintings, she felt being brought into them.

The large ring-shaped painting on top of her was undoubtedly God himself.

It was a dark world with no visible boundaries, and a giant red sphere was suspended in the middle. The sphere was made of magic power, and she could feel its infinite power from simply looking at it. Half of it seemed to be cut off by a knife or hidden in darkness, so only half could be seen.

The more closely Zero looked at it, the surer she was of her judgment.

It was just too majestic.

She was nothing compared to this ball of magic power. She could not even find the words to describe how giant it was, only that even the world under her was dwarfed by this red sphere. The swirls of magic power on its surface were even wider than the ocean, and the light of the shining magic power was even brighter than the sun—besides God, who else could have such vast powers?

This was probably the Bloody Moon recorded in the Holy Book—from the side, the half-sphere truly did not look like a full moon.

Zero once tried to pray to it, but it did not respond and only floated calmly in the darkness as if it was waiting for the results of the Battle of Divine Will.

This was why she was extremely enraged by Isabella's words. This thing did not give anyone its blessing... she realized after witnessing it in person that humans were insignificant in God's eyes.

After she separated from her thoughts, Zero looked towards the four paintings at the bottom.

She believed that the reason the battles that occurred every 400 years were called Battle of Divine Will had something to do with the content of these paintings.

The church's secret history recorded past Union leaders' and popes' interpretations of the paintings, and most of them came to the same conclusion—the location of the ending of the war was in these four paintings.

Chapter 484: The Distance to God (Part II)

The first painting had the richest contents.

It depicted a throne constructed with swords and bones, and blood red long windows and tall black columns were behind it. It seemed to be a part of a palace. If she completely submerged her consciousness into it, she could even see the city outside the window with endless spires. What caught her attention the most was the Stone Gate that peeked through the city—if the spires around it were the buildings of Hermes residents, then the Stone Gates at least five times as tall as the church's Tower of Babel, which completely went against common sense.

What was more unbelievable was that the inside of the gates was black, as if a large and smooth cloth was covering its middle. However, as she looked closely, there seemed to be an immeasurable depth to the darkness... The more she stared at it, the more uneasy she felt.

Zero only focused her attention on the window for a while and soon turned it to the throne.

She did not see the lord of the throne today.

The things she saw in her mind would sometimes change. For example, she could occasionally see an armored warrior sitting on the throne, his head covered with a frightening black helmet, only revealing a faint red light through his eye sockets. However, this was not very common, and the throne was usually empty.

According to the records of secret history, this painting depicted the city where the demons originated from and first appeared—the Northwestern corner of Land of Dawn.

Zero agreed with this theory. The painting's blood red colors and black spires were very similar to the demons' living environments, and the helmet of the owner of the throne had a distinct demonic style. The only strange part was that its body was exactly like that of a regular human, and not like the strong and horrific bodies of the Fearsome Demons or Lords of Hell recorded in the Holy Book. Thus, there were many speculations about its identity. Some popes believed that it was the source of evil, while other witches thought that it was a member of the demons that guarded the secrets of God.

The second painting was much more mysterious.

It had few contents, which seemed to keep moving. At least in Zero's limited number of observations, she had never seen the same scene twice.

This time, she saw water.

The light blue water rippled backward against three large skeletons, which were completely hollow inside, but the water was somehow held outside the bones by an invisible barrier. It was as if the giant skeletons were keels supporting the side ports, and she felt like she was in a boat and looking out through the window—except these windows spanned the entire wall.

Zero was quickly enthralled by the strange scenery in front of her... She was standing at the border between water and sky, with half of her underwater, and the other half floating above. She could see the bright sunlight and sparse clouds above her, but her legs were encased in water. Under the sun, she could clearly see the color of the water changing from light blue on the surface to bright green, and then dark green, as it went deeper and deeper.

Suddenly, the scene began to shake, and Zero felt the world tremble below her and almost fell over. She subconsciously tried to open her eyes but stopped herself at the last second. "This isn't reality," she told herself. "This is God giving you a sign."

The water was quickly rising and almost drowned out the sky.

Or, perhaps the water was not rising, but she was sinking downwards.

Soon, everything outside the window was covered by water, and she even saw red fish swimming by the skeletons. First, there were only a few of them, but then there were more and more, and the dense schools of fish surrounded the invisible barrier like a red ribbon. The water gradually changed from dark green to a dull black, until the scene was shrouded in a complete darkness and totally disappeared.

Zero broke out of the painting, panting. This was the first time she experienced such a clear vision, and when the darkness covered her eyesight, she felt like she was about to choke.

However, she did not find any useful clues—according to the secret history, the contents of the second painting were always changing. Some recorded seeing a giant eyeball, others saw a volcano spewing bubbles and yellow smoke, and others saw a bottomless abyss giving off a faint light. No observers had ever seen the same thing.

She rested for a while and turned her attention to the third painting.

However, there was still nothing in it... it was like the world outside the frame, dark and dead silent.

The secret history mentioned that in the beginning of the first Battle of Divine Will, there was something in the painting... but this recording was so ancient that its pages were tattered and basically illegible. However, she was certain that a hundred years after the Battle of Divine Will, this painting turned black and never showed anything ever again.

The fourth painting was not at all mentioned in the secret history.

It was difficult for Zero to understand as if they were all in agreement to hide something—if even the sole messenger of secrets, the pope, did not have the right to know, then the secret would be unknown to everyone forever.

The painting depicted a wall.

It was an unassuming rough gray stone wall.

Parts of the gray paint were chipped off, revealing the cracked stone blocks under it. It had obviously stood here for a long time. Besides this wall, there was nothing else.

After staying in the painting for a while, Zero started to feel exhausted.

Reading God's signs took a lot of energy, and even she could not do it for a long time.

Zero opened her eyes to disconnect from the sphere of magic power, causing the dark world and giant paintings to disappear, and she was back in the dim small room.

She sighed deeply and stumbled down the stairs, only recovering after finishing off her cold black tea in the library.

Although God did not give her any response, her anger from before was completely calmed. "Isabella knows nothing about God, but I do."

Zero looked out the window at the busy figures under the tower, and her feeling of control returned. Her experiences during the past 200 years made her disregard everything in this world, but after she became the Pope, she realized that she had only scratched the surface in understanding the world—now, she faced a whole new mystery, and her immortality was perfect for solving it.

Zero felt in her heart that she was the real person chosen by God.

If she could approach God, it would be worth waiting 400 years, even thousands of years.

Chapter 485: The Day of Leaving

"Here comes the ship."

A sail peeked over the end of the light gray horizon. There were no other merchant ships around, so it had to be a ship from Sleeping Island.

"Uh-huh," Tilly gently replied, her voice muffled by the sounds of the sea washing onto the shoals. She had turned her back to Roland, so he could not see her face.

"We're leaving now," Andrea said regrettably. "I really liked your domain, and I've no idea if I can make the same delicious ice cream bread as you have here when I'm back at Sleeping Island."

Along with a bolt rifle, Roland had given her the ice cream recipe as well. "As long as you have eggs and milk, it won't taste too bad. When you come back to Border Town... no, City of Neverwinter next time, I'll have more delicious food for you."

"Will it be even tastier than ice cream?" Andrea held her stray hair and said with a laugh, "You'd better not lie to me. I have your word."

"If you're reluctant to leave, you could stay here," Ashes laid out her hands and said. "Princess Tilly definitely won't mind leaving such a gluttonous witch like you behind—you won't be allowed to eat as much as you want on Sleeping Island."

"Is that true? I won't give you any ice cream when we get back." Andrea stared at her. "You should just eat your dried fish and drink your fishy soup every day."

As they continued to bicker, the sailboat neared the coast. The flying pink flag on the top of the mast told everyone it was the Charming Beauty.

Shavi summoned the invisible barrier, which allowed her to travel and move between the shoal and the ship, enabling her to carry all the books, goods and materials to the ship, without docking. Then, she carried the card-playing three and Princess Tilly, but as Tilly was stepping into the barrier, Roland called her name.

"... What?" She turned her head, her eyes revealing a complex mixture of emotions.

Roland was not good at saying goodbye and had stopped her without forethought. He took a deep breath and shouted, "If you have any problems on Sleeping Island, you can tell me. I'll do my best to help you. And remember that you're always welcome in the City of Neverwinter."

"..." Tilly smiled after a moment. "Thank you, and you too."

"Goodbye, everyone." Andrea and Shavi shouted while waving their hands.

Ashes did not say anything and just waved her hand too.

After their farewell, the barrier carried the witches to the Charming Beauty quickly.

"What's wrong? You don't want them to leave?" Nightingale asked from behind him.

"I just think it's a pity. There are 300 witches... It would be wonderful if they all moved to the Western Region," said Roland with a fake casualness.

"Yeah, and then you'd feel even more guilty." Nightingale rolled her eyes at him.

"Guilty?" Roland felt terrified and asked.

"Why? Living here is better than living on Sleeping Island, isn't it?" Anna was also confused.

"You wouldn't understand, even if I told you." Nightingale turned around and walked towards the hot air balloon. "And that's the most irritating part."

Watching her walk away, Roland felt a sense of relief. Nightingale had disappeared for the last two days, and now she was finally back to normal, so he had nothing to worry about.

"Let's go. There're a lot of things for us to do," Wendy said while smiling.

"OK." Roland and Anna smiled and walked to Cloud Gazer while holding hands.

...

Back in his office, Roland opened his notebook and thought about how he would develop his domain in the coming year.

Undoubtedly, there were two things of the utmost importance that needed addressing.

The first thing to do was to dethrone Timothy and stop him from diminishing the countrymen with the Berserk Pills. This could also greatly expand Roland's reputation and prepare everyone for the unification of the Kingdom of Graycastle.

The second was to absorb Longsong Stronghold as soon as possible to put the City of Neverwinter on the track for construction.

Iron Axe, Carter, Theo in King's City, and he had already discussed the former many times, and they decided to launch the spring offensive at the end of April, which would be at the end of this month. It was the plowing time in many cities, which would not affect the professional First Army, but would affect the

traditional noble, because people would be constrained by their crops and unwilling to start a war at the risk of starvation. If the army suddenly appeared at the outskirts of King's City, Timothy would be totally unprepared.

The steam engine plant, ammunition factory, and concrete boat plant were all busy producing resources for battle. Meanwhile, logistics operations were at full speed. Plus the City Hall boasted enough manpower, and the First Army was experienced in battles. Roland had a good grasp on the necessary resources and their deployment, so he was not worried at all about either.

The most important thing at the moment was to utilize the resources of Stronghold.

Thinking of this, Roland told Barov to come to his office.

"Have you cataloged all of the industries in Longsong Stronghold and its surrounding territories?"

Barov pulled out a notebook. "It's all in here, Your Highness. The primary income was from the mining industry and salt industry, especially the former—there was a high-quality gem mine to the west of Longsong Stronghold near the Impassable Mountain Range, whose output accounted for more than half of the Stronghold's income."

"Gem mine?" Roland was not interested in luxuries. "Isn't there also a gem mine in the North Slope Mine? Why did that town appear so poorly last time I visited?"

"It's not the same, Your Highness." Barov rubbed his hands and said, "The gems of the North Slope Mine are the byproducts of other mineral veins, so the quantity is very small, and they might not even be good enough to be made into jewelry when they're cut. But the gem mine in Stronghold is full of colorful stones, and each of them can easily be made into a high-quality multicolored stone. The gems are worth dozens of gold royals once sold in King's City, and the output and quality are far better than that of the gems from the North Slope Mine."

"A multicolored stone?" Roland asked curiously, "What does it look like?"

"It's generally transparent and has no fixed color. It reflects many different colors under the sunlight, from light green to orange-red, and it shows multiple colors after being cut. It's more like crystallized sunlight than a normal ruby or sapphire." Barov paused. "The multicolored stone of the Kingdom of Grayscale, the Ice Stone of the Kingdom of Everwinter and the luminary stone of the Kingdom of Dawn are the most popular gems among the noble."

"That gem sounded pretty luxurious." Roland thought. "Maybe it could be used to make a ring for Anna. But, the gem mine has little value when talking about the improvement of people's livelihood." Roland asked, "Any other mineral resources?"

"The Maple Family and the Wild Rose Family each have an iron ore mine," Barov said, "but, they're both smaller than the North Slope Mine."

"The domains of the two families are both surrounded by the Impassable Mountain Range—these mountains crossing the Four Kingdoms may be full of treasure," Roland thought. "Maybe I can explore along the foot of the mountain with Sylvie to find an ore reserve for the City of Neverwinter. After all, steel is a powerful resource for industrial manufacturing."

Chapter 486: A Call for Help

"What about the salt industry?"

There were many ore resources in the Western Region, so it was not surprising that mining was the primary industry of Stronghold. However, this was the first mention of the salt industry, and Prince Roland had no knowledge of local specialties. In Roland's opinion, salt should be the main industry in coastal cities.

"Stronghold, the Elk Family, and the Honeysuckle Family each have one salt well. In fact, the three salt wells are very close to each other and basically located on the borders of their domains. I heard that over 200 years ago, civil wars in the Western Region often happened there and lasted for 50 years." Barov stroked his mustache.

Roland wondered if the three nobilities occupying the area had then become the biggest winners. He asked with great interest, "What's the output of these salt wells?"

"Besides supplying the Western Region, the salt was also sold to Fallen Dragon Ridge, Redwater City, and some other small villages along the way." Barov leafed through his notebook. "It accounted for almost 15% of the Stronghold income."

"Why such a low percentage?" Roland asked in surprise. "The market price for salt isn't low."

"It's too hard to get the salt out of the deep pit." Barov shook his head. "I know a nobleman in Silver City who has a salt well in his domain. It's about the size of a human head and too small for a cask. People mine it by putting water in and scooping it up with a bamboo stick after the salt melts."

"Why not expand the well?"

Barov smiled smugly. "Your Highness, the salt bed is too deep. If we dig it like a water well, its walls will collapse. According to him, the salt well has been mined from his grandfather's generation, and now the well is as deep as a belfry in King's City."

"I see," Roland thought. Limited by the depth, people here mined salt wells using the brine method, but the process could be improved. Lifting the salt mine with Lotus's power or extracting the brine with a steam engine would be more efficient.

An abundant salt supply would not only bring great profits to the City of Neverwinter, but also popularize healthier and more delicious food to the subjects. The salt they had at present was crude and saline with all kinds of impurities and foreign substance.

"I see." At this thought, the prince nodded with satisfaction. "You can go now. Don't forget to do population expansion work. The Months of Demons just passed, so it's a good time to recruit before refugees starve without their crops."

"I had the same thought, Your Highness," Barrow said with his hand on his chest, "The new emissary delegation will leave soon,

and I think they will gain more than last year."

After the chief left, Roland was about to plan how to deal with the Stronghold resources, when he heard a knocking on the window.

He turned his head and found a gray falcon lying on the window grille with a note on its foot.

Nightingale opened the window and let the flying messenger in.

It was a letter from Petrov Hull in Longsong.

Roland read the letter quickly and could not help but laugh. After Nightingale came back to Border Area with him, it had been difficult to continue the fight against crime. They received all kinds of reports from the masses, and it was difficult to identify what was true, and what had been made up for the cash reward. Less than half of the Rats had applied for jobs. The new Minister of Justice, Rene Medde was busy all day long and could not control the Black Street Forces. If it went on like this, public safety would deteriorate.

Petrov had written at the end of the letter that he wanted the prince to help him with manpower and technology, but Roland knew he actually wanted Nightingale and Vader to help the Earl of the Elk Family.

He gave the letter to Nightingale. She glanced at it and said,

"They can't hold Stronghold anymore?"

"The former Ragingfire was just a response to the war among the masses. He has no experience in battling or capturing the Rats." Roland smiled and said, "As I expected, they have a long way to go in fighting the Rats, and there'll be many relapses. But they'll eventually be destroyed with powerful measures and given a better way of life. Once they're on the right track, it'll be hard to stray into evil again. This is the case for both people and cities."

"Do you want me to go?" Nightingale sighed.

"Don't forget that Longsong and Border Town are one city now. Don't separate them from each other." He shrugged. "I said at the expansion meeting that there'll be a day when we could have breakfast in Border Area and work in Longsong Area half an hour later. And you are in charge of the Security Bureau, you are expected to travel between the two places and inspect the work."

"If I go, what will protect you?" She shook her head. "Don't tell me there'll be no danger. You are the thorn in Timothy and the church's side, and only I can stop assassin witches."

Roland wanted to say that he had the God's Stone of Retaliation and would not be hurt by a normal witch, but he realized that was not what she was worried about. "Listen to me."

She cut in, "You can't make me promise anything, and Wendy and Scroll will agree with me. You're the most important person in the Witch Union—"

"I'll go with you."

"Ahem, re-really..." Nightingale choked in shock and turned her head to avoid his gaze. "I guess I'm the only one who can help them."

The prince could not help but laugh. "Take Summer with you. It's time for her to practice."

"And Sylvie and Soraya should go too to establish the identification systems while checking out the mines, and maybe even build up the City Hall," he thought. "I wonder how the training of the nobility in Longsong Stronghold is going."

...

Three days later, Roland boarded with the witches and the nobility in Stronghold to go to Longsong Area.

Looking at the cement paddle steamer and the coal cinder in the deck seams in the Redwater River, he sighed. It seemed impossible to reach Longsong Stronghold in one day, this speed was still too slow for him. After all, time was money. Roland planned to build an exclusive luxury high-speed ship.

Chapter 487: The Guarding Shield

By dusk, the ship reached the port of the inland river near Longsong Stronghold.

Petrov had heard about their trip and greeted them at the port with his followers. When they returned the castle, a grand welcoming banquet awaited them in the hall of the first floor. After taking over Longsong Stronghold, something changed in Roland's heart. When watching the nobles giving toasts to each other, he felt the money spent on the banquet came out of his own pocket.

After briefly greeted the eldest son of the Honeysuckle Family, he cut to the chase. "Have the Rats come out again?"

"Judging from the reports we received, it seems so." Petrov made a gesture to guide the prince to a corner of the hall. "Compared with the former organized Black Street groups, the criminals we recently arrested mostly acted individually, such as thieves, burglars, and murderers, all of whom were pulled to the square to be hung. Since you asked us to judge with adequate proof, the criminals we executed were only a small portion of all the reported criminals. Verifying the information in hand took quite some time. Besides..." The eldest son of the Honeysuckle Family paused. "We're in a great trouble recently."

"What is it?"

"Someone openly resisted your policies, Your Highness," Petrov

said in a worried tone. "Earl Medde knows more about it. I'll ask him to tell you in detail."

"Your Highness, the Elk Family greets you." After being summoned, Rene came and bowed to the prince, and then he began to tell the whole story. "Recently, something serious happened in North Street of the outer town... Um, Sheriff Vader would call it a serial killing case."

"Um, it's actually what I would call it." This triggered Roland's interests. "Carry on."

"Yes," Rene Medde said in a serious voice. "Since three days ago, a resident has been found dead at home every night. The victims were all male, lived alone, had no families, and most importantly, they applied for jobs in the City Hall."

The prince frowned. "Were they regular employees?"

"If handymen can be counted as full-time job, then yes." The Earl of the Elk Family nodded. "In the room of each victim, there was a painting drawn with blood—a crown and a cross. Because of the identical mark, I sought confirmation from the City Hall and then found all the victims were among the list of people who were about to be sent to the Redriver District to build houses.

"You think their intention is..."

"To sabotage your enrollment plan, Your Highness," Rene

replied. "Rumors have been spreading in North Street saying that whoever applies for a job in the City Hall will be a target for killers."

"I believe that's what's happening." Petrov chimed. "We've employed less than we'd expected, and there're barely any applicants from North Street. Moreover, there're applicants who regret applying and say that they're physically unfit for going out of town and hope that the officials can take their names off the City Hall's enrollment list. Now, the rumor is only spread in North Street, but if it goes as far as other blocks, it could sabotage your construction plan."

Roland contemplated for a moment. "Have you got any clues about the suspect?"

"We..." Rene opened his mouth and said after a while, "There were no witnesses to the crimes, so we've no idea where to start the searching."

"Really..." Roland felt surprised. "How did you solve such cases on previous occasions?"

"Do you mean the patrol team?" The young Earl of the Elk Family hesitated for a while. "As far as I know, they didn't have standard handling methods. If it was an influential case where the families of the victim appealed to the Lord, and the Lord decided to show his subjects justice, he would pressure the Black Street gangsters and order the Rats to hand over the criminal—the patrol team didn't care if the person they handed over was only a scapegoat or not. If the victim was only a foreigner or lived alone, the patrol

team would usually ignore it."

"This is outrageous!" Roland was shocked. "The patrol party's way of handling such cases is equal to handing over the jurisdiction to the Rats. No wonder people were saying that Rats were the other party who ruled the city. Besides, in this era, there seems to be no such a thing as a criminal investigation, so if there's no witness in a murder case, it'll most likely become suspended—of course, that's only the case for civilians.

Border Town has always been under Nightingale's supervision, plus it has a simple population composition, so all the crimes here are instantly cracked, which led to my neglect of this matter. Although Rene didn't say so, he might think that my request of a verdict on verified evidence is too demanding.

But no matter what, I won't allow the using of scapegoats in my territory."

"I see. From tomorrow on, the Security Bureau will take over this case, and all you need to do is to cooperate."

"Yes. Thank you, Your Highness," Rene said joyfully.

...

After the banquet, Roland returned to his study on the top floor of the castle. The interior of the study looked very different now—the book shelves around the walls were all torn down, and a soft

couch, a tea table, and cushions were added. Behind the desk, the wall was knocked open, and two French windows were installed. Although they were not made of crystal glass, they greatly expanded the view of the room. Through the slightly tinted glass, Roland overlooked Stronghold, enveloped in darkness, and nodded with satisfaction.

It seems Petrov followed my orders with great care, which means my choosing him as my deputy was a wise decision.

"How do you plan to handle this?" Nightingale emerged from the Mist sitting on the desk with her legs crossed.

"I'm not planning to handle it at all." The prince smiled, shaking his head. "Now that all the nobles have returned to Longsong, tomorrow the primary work is to have them establish the secondary City Hall, divide them into departments, and place some people in charge. The sooner the structure is established, the earlier Soraya can draw identification cards. You'll be the one in charge of fighting crimes."

"Me?"

"You're the head of the Security Bureau, so it's totally up to you to decide how to solve a case... The whole police department of the City of Neverwinter is in your command; both Vader and Rene are your subordinates."

"But didn't you always say that the authority of the departments should be separated, and administrative status should be equal?"

Nightingale felt bewildered. "I don't understand how the City Hall operates, but this arrangement seems to put the Security Bureau above the City Hall."

"Territorial security is top priority, which is exactly why you report directly to me," Roland said affirmatively. "Not only for the police department, but all the examination work for the City Hall and the army will be carried out by you. Indeed, each department should be separated and not interfere with one another, but there needs a web that binds them together and stops power abuse and corruption. It'll prevent the collapse of the new system from within. You must have heard the saying: the firmest defense collapses from within." He paused for a while, looking into Nightingale's eyes. "You're the most powerful shield to prevent all these things from happening. Now, both my personal safety and the security of the territory are in your hands."

."

Chapter 488: The Breeding Ground for Evil

"We're going to catch all the criminals and stop them from perpetrating in the City of Neverwinter!"

Nightingale held onto Summer's shoulder and said loudly.

"Uh, yes... Lady Nightingale." Summer then shrank back. "But it's time to go to sleep..."

"It's still early. Let's talk about the countermeasures for tomorrow." Her eyes were sparkling. "No one can escape our hunting, not even the most cunning Rat! Right, you can call me sister instead."

"Yes... Sister Nightingale."

Oh, my God, Summer did not understand, why as an ordinary townsman, she had to catch criminals. Wasn't it the patrol party's job? Plus, Lady Nightingale... no, Sister Nightingale had been so excited since she had returned from the prince's office. She had been saying "catching criminals" over and over again.

"She's really a witch who hates evils as she does her own enemies." Summer said to herself. "But can I really help her?"

As Summer thought about this, she asked cautiously. "What shall we do? I've never caught a criminal."

"It's my job to catch the criminals," Nightingale patted her chest proudly and said, "And, you only need to rebuild the crime scene to show us who the murderer was!"

"You mean the exact moment of the killing?" Summer hesitated and continued, "But, how can I know when exactly the killer did it?"

"Uh..." Nightingale paused. "You're right. How often can you use your ability?"

"I practiced with Sister Wendy for a week and four times is the limit now, I think that's the best I can do," Summer said with frustration. "My magic power is very limited and if the illusion lasts a little longer, the number of uses will decrease. Besides, I cannot rebuild a scene from two days earlier, otherwise, the magic power will run out very fast."

"How long can the illusion last?"

"Half, half a quarter."

"Um... that's rather short." Nightingale paced to and fro at the bedside. "It'll be troublesome if the flashback doesn't reveal the criminal." She meditated for a few minutes. "If you reduce the lasting time of each illusion, can you try a few more times?"

"Maybe I can, but I'm not sure," Summer murmured, "Sister Wendy told me if I could control the magic power accurately, I

would be able to control the length of time. But every time I summon my power, I always feel the magic waning quickly."

"It's such a pity Countess Spear isn't here," Nightingale said with a regretful look. "Anyway, let's deduce a time and take a chance."

"Take, take a chance?"

"Yes!" Nightingale said, laughing. "I'm always pretty lucky; otherwise, I wouldn't ever have met Prince Roland." She suddenly became sad at these words. "... if only it could have been a few days earlier."

"How could that be considered as lucky?" Summer shouted in her mind. "Anyway, luck is unreliable! My ability won't work even a few hours later, let alone days. Can we really catch criminals tomorrow?"

"Well, now go to sleep." Nightingale blew out the candles and darkness soon enveloped the room.

"Uh-uh." Summer answered and climbed onto the big bed. The soft bedding covered her immediately.

"God, this is the bed of a noble? It's too comfortable." Summer buried her head into the clean pillow and felt her body sinking into the bed. She stretched her body and quickly started to fall asleep.

Do all the witches in the castle sleep with such comfortable

bedding? If I slept on such a bed, I wouldn't ever feel like getting up again.

She could hear Nightingale mumbling while she was trying to fall asleep.

"I'm his shield..."

And then Summer fell asleep.

...

Early the next morning, she was woken up by Nightingale.

"Hurry up. We ought to go," Nightingale said energetically.

"Yes..."

Summer struggled to get off the bed, put on her coat, and went downstairs with Nightingale. In the lobby, there was a tall man with brown hair pacing back and forth. When he saw them, he stepped forward and said with a bow, "Good morning. I'm Rene Medde, the Earl of the Elk Family. I've been waiting for you, you must be Lady Nightingale, and this is..."

"Summer, she's my assistant." Nightingale raised her head a little. "She's a witch, too."

"Is that so?" He looked a little surprised but quickly nodded at Summer. "That's great. The criminals will have nowhere to go if I get your help."

"Where is your staff?"

"They're all waiting outside the castle."

"Very well. Ask them to wait a little while longer, I haven't had my breakfast yet."

"Of course, please take your time."

Summer fixed her eyes on them until Nightingale turned into the dining room. She hurried to follow at her heels. "God, is this Sister Nightingale? She hadn't seen Sister Nightingale so dignified and serious—No, not exactly. She's so supercilious as if she were a noble."

That's definitely not something to be expected from a civilian.

Besides, the man is an Earl. In Valencia, the young Earl would be the perfect lover in every woman's eyes. If I were Sister Nightingale, I'd be too nervous to say a word. But Sister Nightingale seemed not care about this and kept him waiting for her.

"Is this all right?" Summer asked with concerns.

"Take it easy. His Highness told me that a noble is just a title in his territory and even the Earl won't devour you." Nightingale smiled. "Besides, Security Bureau is superior to the City Hall and I'm his boss. Why can't I make him wait for me?"

Summer felt the woman was suddenly beyond her reach.

After breakfast, they left the castle to investigate the scene of the murder. Last night, another victim died at home. This time, however, it was on the corner of North Street and West Street.

"It is the fourth one." Nightingale frowned. "And the murderer is moving to the west."

"It shows the killer realized the propagating effect of committing crimes only in a specific block was unsatisfactory," Rene nodded. "After all, the Rats' organization no longer exists."

Walking not too far down a muddy alley, the leading police officer stopped at a tumble-down cabin. "Sir, it's here."

Summer walked into the cabin after Nightingale and her heart skipped a beat.

A man was lying on the floor with his neck cut open and his vital fluid everywhere. There was a crossed crown on the wall facing the door and the heavy, metallic smell of blood filled the room.

"Ugh..." She had to cover her mouth to prevent herself from throwing up.

Chapter 489: Tracking Down The Criminal

"Is this the first time you've witnessed a scene like this?" Rene came up to her, looking quite concerned. "Perhaps it'll be better if you go outside and get some fresh air."

"No. No, thanks." Seeing Nightingale squatting by the body examining the wounds, Summer declined the offer. If Nightingale was still able to keep her composure at such a horrible crime scene... she must also stay here. Summer continued, "I, uh, feel much better now."

"When was he found?" Nightingale turned questioning.

"Early this morning. The residents nearby found his body when they went to draw water. It was before sunrise. The door was left wide open as it is now, as if the killer wanted to announce the death to the whole community." Rene answered. "In the past, it would take two or three days for us to hear about something like this. The City Hall has been offering rewards for information, so it was reported sooner."

"Do you know the victim's identity?"

"Shovel, freeman." Rene glanced about the room. "Nothing valuable has been found. Um... it looks like he used to be a Rat, too."

"Did anyone see him last night?"

"I checked. Nobody."

"Any noises heard?"

"None."

"It doesn't sound right; a strong man like him?" Nightingale frowned. "Even if his throat was slit, he wouldn't die immediately. Someone should have heard him struggling for life or banging on the floor. Are you sure they weren't lying?"

"I don't think so," Rene replied hesitantly. "The murder has sparked panic among the community. Plus, the residents get rewards for assisting the police. They shouldn't have any reason to lie."

"Well, bring them here. I'll interview them myself. And, Summer?" Nightingale looked toward her assistant.

"Yes?" Summer responded with a shiver.

"Go to the castle and bring Soraya here."

"Uh, sure."

Summer staggered out and ran toward the castle.

Somehow, she found the way in which Nightingale gave commands utterly beautiful. Everything about her character demonstrated great confidence. No wonder His Highness trusted her with the Security Bureau.

...

When Summer came back, there were another two people following her.

"Why didn't His Highness ask me to deal with such matters?" Lightning flew into the room, exclaiming. "He's unfair!"

"Coo, coo!" Maggie rejoined.

"I couldn't stop them," Summer said timidly.

"Shouldn't you protect Prince Roland while I'm away?" Nightingale's brows went up a fraction of an inch. "This isn't an adventure game!"

"Relax. Sylvie's there, nobody can easily approach His Highness," Lightning winked. "Besides, His Highness is going to call a meeting with the nobles and there'll be no danger in the castle hall."

"How incredible..." thought Summer. How could these two girls act so airily at such a horrendous crime scene? Especially

Lightning. She was several years younger, and her eyes were sparkling with excitement. What on earth had they been through since becoming witches?

"Who are these?" Rene and the other policemen stared at the girl and the bird, eyes wide open.

"They're witches." Nightingale grumbled. "Anyway, you ought to get back to the castle before the end of the meeting. Got it?"

"Aw..." Lightning pouted.

"Um, you wanted me to draw the body?" Soraya was the last to enter the room. Summer felt slightly relieved when she noticed Soraya looking as ghastly pale as herself.

"Not the body, the murderer." Nightingale closed the door and disclosed the plan. "Once we've got a picture of the killer, we'll post it on the bulletin boards at the square and offer cash rewards to people who provide tips. This should be the fastest way to find him."

The Earl of the Elk Family gasped. "You mean the witch here, Miss Summer, can reconstruct the crime scene?"

"It depends. She can maintain the illusion for only a limited period of time, so we also need a bit of luck. You'll see." Nightingale gave Summer a nod of approval. "Go ahead."

"Okay." Summer shut her eyes and traced time back to somewhere between midnight and dawn as Nightingale instructed. In the darkness, her magic power streamed from the tips of her fingers and intertwined, gradually forming a clear image. Slowly, some wooden planks, a bed, a table and a room took shape. A house was constructed in her mind. The victim was lying on the floor, his blood running onto the bumpy ground. The previously locked door was pushed open.

"Is this the witch's power?"

"It's unbelievable!"

"Gracious! The illusion is so lifelike. It's almost like the demons' power."

"Hush! Shut up!"

The surrounding police hushed to a whisper.

"It seems he's already dead." Nightingale patted Summer on her shoulder. "Don't waste your magic power. Switch to another time point."

The second time, Summer traced the event back to somewhere close to midnight. The figure on the floor disappeared abruptly, and the victim was lying in bed, appearing to be in deep slumber.

"Does this mean he was killed between the two periods of time?"

Rene asked in bewilderment.

"Correct. The killer took action between midnight and three o'clock this morning.

"I got it! Miss Summer's power doesn't last long, and we're likely to miss the exact moment the murderer was committing the crime. That's why you said we needed a bit of luck!"

"Precisely," said Nightingale. "It likely took a long time for the murderer to leave these marks after he finished the business. Summer, you just start from somewhere close to three o'clock."

Summer nodded and heaved a heavy breath. She summoned her power again and set the time between two and three. The magic power swarmed toward the wall and revealed a stranger standing at the bedside. He was drawing something on the wall with the bloodstained sheet.

"It looks like we've found him." Nightingale smiled. "Lucky indeed."

"So this man is the killer, coo?"

"He looks like nothing special... I thought it would at least be someone stout and strong." Lightning remarked in disappointment.

"I can only draw a side face from this angle." Soraya looked at the

murderer from the wall. "Is there any way to turn him around?"

"Summer, I'll leave it to you." Nightingale instructed.

"Alright." Without further explanation from Nightingale, Summer knew what to do. She pushed the time of the last illusion a quarter backward. This time, everyone saw clearly what the murderer looked like. He first strangled Shovel to death with a rope, dragged him to the floor and then slit his throat with a dagger. During the whole process, Shovel was sleeping like a log without any signs of struggling.

It suddenly struck Rene when he turned and noticed a water tank in the corner of the room. "Did he drink Dreamland Water?"

"It looks like it." Nightingale nodded. "That's why there was no noise. The killer slit his throat just to obtain some blood. The victim had already been dead."

"My, my lord! I've seen this man before!" said a police officer suddenly.

"What?" Both Nightingale and Rene rested their eyes on him.

The police officer paused a moment before continuing. "His name is Maans, and he used to be a patroller. I've dealt with him before."

"Do you know where he lives?" Rene pursued.

"I remember he lives in the inner city... West Street, near the Sheep Tavern."

"Very well. We don't even need to search him out. It appears God is on our side." Nightingale scoffed. "He can't get away with it. Let's go!"

"Yes, my lord!" The police shouted in unison.

Chapter 490: The Real Target

Upon arriving at the Sheep Tavern, the group promptly obtained Maans' address through enquiry.

"I'll go in first to take a look. You guys enter from the front door afterwards. Summer, keep an eye on Lightning and Maggie. Don't let them in." Nightingale entered her Mist and vanished after delivering the order. In her world of black and white, the lines that constructed everything started to twist and distort. She soon located a crack invisible to the naked eye and glided through the wall effortlessly.

The man's abode was as humble as Shovel's. It appeared that Maans had been destitute since losing his job as a patroller. She could see clearly so she knew that there was no God's Stone of Retaliation in the vicinity. Nightingale soon spotted her target in the bedroom. The man was sound asleep beneath the blanket. His coat hung at the bedside with blood smears still on its sleeves.

Nightingale returned to the drawing room to open the door. The police swarmed in. They pushed Maans, who had just woken up with a start, back on the bed and tied him up.

"Who are you? Let me go!" He yelled with horror.

"You're under arrest for murders!" Rene silenced him with two loud slaps. "How dare you plot against His Highness. It'd be merciful even to have you hanged at the city gate!"

"No, I, I didn't..."

"You didn't!?" The slaps turned into punches. After a few muffled sounds, Maans gasped in pain, his mouth full of blood and his front tooth falling out. "We saw you murder Shovel last night. Do you think we'll believe your cunning excuses? You used Dreamland Water to knock him out. Then, you strangled him to death before cutting his throat to avoid getting blood on you. That was pretty smart, eh?"

Maans did not say a word, but his eyes were filled with shock and terror.

"Who gave you the order to kill Rats applying for jobs? Who instructed you to draw a crossed crown with blood at the crime scene?" Nightingale picked up a glass bottle from the night stand, it was filled halfway with light blue liquid. "Dreamland Water isn't cheap, and it isn't easy to get a hold of it now that the gangs have been eradicated."

"I..."

"We might exempt you from death penalties if you spit all out." Rene clasped his hands. "Otherwise, I'll make you fully understand the consequences of infuriating a noble."

Nightingale did not stop his threat, even though she knew the Earl of the Elk Family was lying. Like His Highness had said, security was the top priority, and anyone who posed a threat to it should be punished severely.

Maans hesitated, more punches landed on him.

The knight, who had received professional combat training, hit him between the abdomen and the ribs with just the right amount of strength to inflict excruciating pain, but not enough to cause death.

"Mercy! Mercy! I'm sorry, my lord! It was a guy from the inner city, he told me to do it! He'll pay me four gold royals for each person I kill. He said by doing this, people will nurse a grudge against the police and think those black uniform guys are incapable of protecting the public. In this way, we can reassemble the patrol party!"

Maans collapsed. He was not a strong-minded person. A person who stood firm in his spirit would never choose to be a patroller and benefit himself through robbery and pillage, and certainly would not take four lives for just a few gold royals. Nightingale believed he had probably never expected to be tracked down by the Ministry of Justice so soon after committing the crime, and definitely never thought he would be found out in a city of 20,000 people in merely four days.

Maans confessed everything tearfully, smearing blood and snot all over his collar.

"I don't know how he found me. Our first meeting was at a tavern. He handed me that bottle of Dreamland Water and told me as long as I did what he asked me to, I would get a big chunk of

money. I didn't have any savings at the time, and the police had rejected my application. I was feeling bitter and resentful. So, I agreed."

"The police department will never hire a scumbag like you." Rene coughed out a spit.

"Do you know the man's name and identity?" Nightingale questioned.

"I don't know."

"You're lying."

"I really don't know!"

Nightingale looked toward Rene who immediately took the hint and delivered a few more punches. "The lady here is a witch. She can tell whether you're lying or not. It's indeed very stupid of you to lie in front of her! Don't test our patience!"

"No, my lord, I'm just... just not sure." Maans cried in his shrill voice. "Because he has never told me his name or identity!"

"What did you mean by 'not sure'?"

"I've also wondered why he pays so generously, as he doesn't look like a noble at all. When we met a couple of days ago, I could tell he

was in a hurry and his attire looked a little weird too, like he layered one coat on top of another." Maans panted. "But he seemed to wear a uniform inside, and I also saw an emblem shaped like a petal on his collar."

"An emblem of a petal?" Nightingale and Rene exchanged a look.
"Isn't that the emblem of the Honeysuckle Family?"

"That's why I'm not sure. Everybody knows the Hulls are the lord's supporters, and they would never plot against Lord Wimbledon." Maans said, hanging his head.

"It can't be Petrov, it must be someone else," Rene said firmly.
"Since they meet each other on a daily basis, why not set up a trap to catch the guy?"

This appeared to be the only feasible way. They would arrest the man when Maans met with him and "asked for compensation". By then, everything would be cleared up. Nightingale nodded, but still felt something was missing.

Maans wasn't lying, and what he said was all true. What had gone wrong?

"Nightingale, are you guys alright?" Lightning shouted from outside.

"They've almost finished the meeting, coo. We have to head back now, coo!"

Nightingale had asked Lightning, Maggie and Summer to wait outside because of the violence that might have occurred during the arrest. A flash crossed her mind when she heard the word "meeting" from Maggie. His Highness was now in a meeting with the nobles, discussing the details of founding a new City Hall!

This meant there was not a single guard with the prince to protect him, and the closest one would be outside the hall.

If this person was really a member of the Honeysuckle Family, he could go straight into the castle and enter the hall on the first floor without raising any suspicion, though he would be forbidden to access the second and third floors, which were exclusive to His Highness. Yet she happened to be away from Prince Roland at this very moment!

"Lightning!" Nightingale had no time to explain to Rene and Maans, she dashed out of the room and grasped Lightning's shoulders, yelling, "Take me back to the castle now! His Highness might be in danger!"

"Huh? OK... Hold on tight." Lightning was very surprised, but she carried Nightingale on her back at once. She did not raise any unnecessary questions and flew straight toward the castle. When she was loaded, she flew much lower but still maintained a speed around 100 kilometers an hour. It would take her only half a minute to reach the destination.

Nightingale hoped she was wrong, but felt her terror grow as she

further examined the details. The murders started three days ago, which was exactly when Petrov's letter for help arrived at the Border Area. If this man's real purpose was to distract everybody with several murder cases and put Roland in a defenseless and vulnerable position, it would be the worst-case scenario.

When they were close to the castle, Nightingale stepped into the Mist and entered the hall from the air. Her heart sank when she saw the meeting room in chaos. The nobles seemed to be petrified and were all standing by the wall murmuring. The guards were blocking off the scene. The host seat at the end of the long table, where Prince Roland should have been, was vacant. A man was lying on the floor. Nightingale could not tell whether he was alive or not, but could see his body was covered by the black curtain created by the God's Stone of Retaliation.

Chapter 491: An Assassination Story

For a moment, Nightingale felt as if the entire world trembled.

As she walked out of the Mist, the scene before her eyes regained its usual color. The darkness created by the magic stone also began to dissipate, allowing her heart to stop beating frantically. The man lying on the ground was not Roland, but a guard whom Nightingale had never seen before. He was wearing the standard uniform of the Honeysuckle Family, and on his chest was a dark red mark which looked like a gunshot wound.

"Why are you here?" She heard a familiar voice cry out from beside her.

She turned her head and realized that the person speaking was Roland himself. He was surrounded by layers of bodyguards at one corner of the hall, which explained why Nightingale did not notice him when she rushed in.

"I..." As Nightingale opened her mouth, she realized that her throat was terribly hoarse, while her limbs were cold and numb. Her body felt so feeble that it was as if she had just narrowly survived a disaster. All that she desired to do at that moment was to hug Roland tightly, but she knew that she could not do so as there were other nobles around. Therefore, if she truly wanted to lead the Security Bureau and protect this territory, she had to avoid acting overly intimate with Roland.

Although her brain forbade her from doing so, she entered into

the Mist and walked up to Roland, cutting through the lines of guards. Then, she hugged him with all of her remaining strength.

At once, gasps were heard from the crowd. The onlookers apparently could not understand why a witch appeared out of nowhere and disappeared without saying anything.

In the Mist, Nightingale held on to the prince with both arms. She tucked her head against his chest and listened attentively to his heartbeat. Perhaps, this was the only way to confirm that it was all just a false alarm.

Roland also began to sense what was going on. He clapped his hands and announced, "Everyone shall proceed to the dining hall for lunch first. No one is to leave the castle in the meantime. We'll resume the meeting in the afternoon!"

When only his guards, as well as Petrov, Sylvie and Lightning were left in the hall, Roland asked, "Does the murderer have anything to do with this assassination attempt?"

When she heard Roland's voice speaking to herself, Nightingale began to calm down gradually. She took a few steps back reluctantly and revealed herself once again, pretending that she did not move towards the prince at all, and replied, "Indeed. When I found out that the person directing the criminal was a guard of the Honeysuckle Family, I immediately rushed here." She then explained her findings and Maans' confession. "I couldn't tell that the real purpose was to divert our attention in order to create an opportunity to lay hands on you... thankfully, you're safe."

"His plan worked until the last step, and he accurately calculated the time that I would arrive, as well as predicted the witches' movements." Roland gave a sigh. "This person is wasted as an assassin."

Petrov immediately knelt down on one knee and said, "Your Highness, I really didn't know that he's..."

"Stand up. You've said this before, and you know I don't like to punish people." Roland interjected. "But it was no doubt that due to your negligence of duty, there were agents among the castle servants and the outer guard."

"I..." Petrov opened his mouth to speak, and then lowered his head. "I'm guilty."

"Find out the identity and background of the assassin. I want to know as soon as possible."

"Yes, Your Highness!"

After the eldest son of the Honeysuckle Family took his leave, Nightingale enquired about her worries. "How was the situation like?"

"Threatening but not dangerous," Roland replied, laughing. "Thanks to Sylvie's warning... but then again, the assassin was already at a disadvantage when he chose to do it in the meeting

hall."

After listening to the prince's account, Nightingale began to understand how the attempt took place—but in reality, it was not as easy as Roland put it. Though weapons were not permitted to bring into the hall, the assassin had concealed a dagger under his clothes, and because he was a castle guard, no one conducted a body check on him before he was allowed in.

The assassin's only error was to carry a God's Stone of Retaliation. It was common for the outer guards to adorn magic stones, but in the hall, it appeared particularly prominent—in order not to distract Sylvie, all of the nobles would comply with the request to take off their adornments. Hence, Sylvie noticed the assassin the moment she saw the black cavity, and when he moved towards the prince, she immediately issued a warning.

Although Roland described the following scene as simple, Nightingale broke into a cold sweat as she listened to his story. The hall was approximately 20 meters in length and width, and when the assassin heard the warning, he picked up speed and charged towards the main seat of the long table, where his target was sitting. By the time the prince pulled out his revolver and opened its safety lock, the assassin had already struck him on his lower back with the dagger. As someone who had undergone assassination training, Nightingale naturally understood that compared to the chest and head, which a person would protect subconsciously, the waist area was very difficult to protect, and the severe pain that could be inflicted by a single strike might cause the target to lose his ability to resist, enabling the assassin to easily go for the vital blood vessels in the neck next.

Luckily, Roland was wearing the protective clothing that Soraya specially made for him. The dagger failed to penetrate its coating and thereby could not prevent Roland's subsequent defensive action. He opened fire at the assassin while the gun was literally pressing on the assassin's chest. The two 12mm caliber bullets fired immediately killed the assassin, causing a loud booming sound which led to a huge commotion in the hall.

Nightingale could clearly visualize just how risky this sequence of events was. If His Highness did not manage to open the safety lock in time, or the gun failed to fire off, the consequence would have been unimaginable... Nightingale turned her head and cast a glance at Lightning, who immediately dropped her head as though to acknowledge her mistake.

"Your Highness, we've figured it out," Petrov re-entered the hall and said. "His name's Shio. He's not a native of the Western Region, but was formerly one of Duke Ryan's castle guards."

"Duke Ryan?" Roland frowned. "Why did you choose someone like that to be your guard?"

"He's just an ordinary guard. At that time, every family lost a lot of manpower, and thus I brought in those who weren't so attached to the Duke. This is how it's usually done in Stronghold..." Petrov answered cautiously. "I believe that it's unlikely that he committed this attempt as revenge for the Duke."

"He's not lying," Nightingale thought. "When a large family fell, apart from the subordinates who were given land and title, the remaining people were perceived by the other families as resources

that can be divided. To them, it's simply a change of owner. Because the Honeysuckle Family had long surrendered to His Highness, plus the fact that Stronghold was always managed by Petrov, this portion of people was never examined."

"How many men with a similar background are there?" Roland asked. "Did you also hire men from the Wild Rose, Maple and Wolf families?"

"There're only three or four of them in the outer guard," Petrov replied, nodding his head. "The servants, citizens and serfs from the other three families were assigned to the Honeysuckle and Elk families. I guarantee that they won't appear in Stronghold."

"Okay, then I shall not concern myself with them. But remember, in the castle area, even the men of the perimeter garrison must be chosen from your family, understood? As for the inner castle, I'll arrange them myself."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Meanwhile, seal off Shio's residence. I'll find out the real reason behind his attempt." Roland then turned to look at Lightning. "Inform Maggie to fetch Countess Spear here."

Chapter 492: Reality & Illusion

As she followed Roland back to his office, Nightingale muttered to him, "I failed to protect you..."

"No, you did well," Roland responded, shaking his head. "Think, why did the assassin, Shio, choose the meeting hall of all places? Because he knew that I'm being protected by an extremely powerful witch, and if he didn't trick her away, he wouldn't have a chance. The more arrangements he had to make, the weaker his attack became, and he was ultimately able to strike me with only a tiny dagger."

"But he nearly succeeded."

"It can't be considered a success without killing me right there, and your presence served to restrict this possibility." Roland laughed. "What would he have done if I didn't have you? He would have waited patiently for a chance to launch a fatal attack—there would be chances as long as he could remain in the castle. This shows that you've already protected me very well. In fact, the safer the territory is, the safer I am as well."

"These aren't empty words of consolation..." Nightingale mused. "His Highness seems to really believe so." She felt a warm surge run through her body, and the nagging feelings of remorse allayed considerably. "Understood. But you mustn't let Lightning and Maggie off the hook this time!"

"Uh, what did they do?"

"When I wasn't around, they should have been by your side to guard against lurking enemies!" Nightingale pointed out. "Like in today's situation, the assassin wouldn't have been able to hurt you at all if Lightning was there to fly you up."

"She's just a little more active..."

"That won't do! Wendy and Scroll will definitely agree with me if they're around. If we don't let Lightning and Maggie understand their mistake, things may go wrong the next time when something like this happens!"

"Oh..." The prince deliberated briefly while stroking his chin. "I got it. I'll punish them by forbidding them to go outside until they complete three sets of MPC (Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry) comprehensive exercises. How does that sound?"

Nightingale inhaled a mouthful of cold air. "Comprehensive exercises... the math section is still okay, but the physics and chemistry sections are even scarier than the basic natural principles. Just the first page alone can make you sleepy, especially those weird formulas and diagrams, which are no different from the incantations in the legends." If it was herself who had to do the exercises, she would likely never be able to go out ever again. Yet, she was the one who came up with the suggestion and thus she felt that it was inappropriate to take it all back. Hardening her heart, she nodded at Roland and affirmed. "Great. This way, they'll surely recognize their mistake."

...

The afternoon meeting proceeded smoothly, with Nightingale staying behind and guarding Roland until it was dusk. The general framework and first batch of candidates for the secondary City Hall were finally confirmed.

Petrov Hull was appointed as Chief Executive of the Longsong Region. Apart from overseeing the City Hall, he was also concurrently Minister of Finance, while his father, Earl Hull, served as Minister of Construction. Therefore, Petrov could be considered one of the biggest winners among the Stronghold nobles this time. Even Nightingale gasped silently at this decision. Indeed, His Highness did not place the blame for the assassination attempt on the Honeysuckle Family—by the lords' standards, this could be considered to be a wonderful expression of fairness and clemency.

The other ministries were to be helmed by several outstanding people from the lower nobles. These people were formerly barons or knights, who would normally not be qualified for the higher levels of government. They were highly touched by His Highness' decision to remove the restrictive criteria and thereby expressed their willingness to serve him for life.

Although they sounded sincere, Nightingale had no doubt that should the situation ever change, such as if Timothy or the church captured the Western Region, there was a high chance that these people would quickly forget about their vows.

Before the meeting was dismissed, His Highness repeatedly

emphasized two employment principles—the manpower of each family could be used within the ministries, but the proportion must not exceed 30 percent, and their files had to be reported to the City Hall beforehand. Another point was that no matter whether family manpower was used or not, the salaries of all employees would be paid by the City Hall, and any ministry head who kept the money would be harshly punished as criminals.

Nightingale was completely uninterested in these details, and thus she yawned repeatedly as she listened, until she caught sight of Maggie flying back into the castle with Countess Spear on her back, and her spirits lifted at once.

After the dinner party, a line of people followed Earl of the Elk Family to Shio's residence—it was a regular bungalow located in the castle quarter, and the inside of the house was extremely clean, such that not a single shred of paper could be found. Apparently, Shio was well-prepared and had destroyed all possible evidence before he acted.

"Shio spent his days in the castle, and thus we only need to reconstruct what he did at night." The prince advised Summer. "I'll need to find out everything he did here from the first time he contacted patrol member Maans until today. Every segment of activity in this house is important."

Countess Spear summoned her magic power to connect Maggie and Summer together.

Obtaining an abundant amount of magic power temporarily, Summer began to recreate the details of each night. Shio seemed to

come back to life. He would sometimes sit in deep thought by the fireplace, and sometimes write things down on paper. All of these segments were recorded by Soraya's eyes.

On the fourth day, he sat as usual by the fireplace, but this time he had an emblem in his hands.

"Wait... I think I've seen this thing before." Roland's voice sounded surprised. "Draw it for me."

By using a Magic Pen, the emblem was quickly drawn on paper. It was roughly the size of a thumb, and its body was a gem that was polished into the shape of a button. Identical logos, comprising of a tower and a spear, were engraved on both sides—this was the typical emblem of the royal family.

"Could he be Timothy's man?" Nightingale asked unconsciously.

Roland frowned without saying a word, and seemed to ponder for a long while before he shook his head faintly and said, "No, this is the keepsake of King Wimbledon III."

"Are you saying... your father?" Rene looked completely astonished.

"Wasn't the king already.... by the eldest prince, Gerald..." Petrov was equally shocked.

"When I was little, I saw this emblem on my father's study desk

and even asked him what it was. He told me that every piece of gem represented a warrior who was loyal to the royal family, and therefore the more gems there were, the more stable the throne was." The prince then took a deep sigh. "By the looks of it, Shio was a pawn placed by my father by Duke Ryan's side, and helped him to monitor the development and trend of the entire Western Region."

"If so, why did he want to kill you?" Rene asked.

"Most likely, Timothy found the gem list and ordered the assassination... to these warriors, the emblem means everything, and hence any and every order must be carried out."

"That's why..." Nightingale glanced at the illusion of the assassin—he observed the emblem for a long time and eventually tossed the gem into the fireplace. His expression seemed a little sad, and at the same time, he revealed a hint of relief on his face. Probably, in Shio's eyes, the order represented a kind of freedom.

Having understood clearly the reason for the attempt, Roland did not seem relieved nevertheless. With a grim face, he stared at the sparks in the fireplace and did not shift his gaze for a long time.

...

Late at night, after Summer had fallen asleep, Nightingale quietly snuck into Roland's room.

Ever since she was admonished by Wendy, she had not done this

again, until now. The assassination attempt had caused a constant undulation of her emotions, and without the presence of Wendy and Anna in the castle, she felt a little more unfettered and free.

Watching Roland Wimbledon in his deep sleep, she emerged from the Mist and quietly walked up to the bedside. She bent down and kissed Roland on the forehead.

Sorry, Your Highness, I can't control myself.

Chapter 493: The Gem Mine

Roland rolled out of his bed under the glare of daylight.

He put on his coat and walked to the window. The snow covering the buildings outside had partially melted to reveal some areas of red roofs and gray walls, which brought both colors and vitality to the landscape. Inside the room, it was still cold, but if you faced the sunlight, you could also feel a little bit of warmth.

The snow had begun to melt.

He stepped into his office and saw his breakfast arranged neatly on his desk. As usual, there was a fried egg, two pancakes, and a cup of warm water. Nightingale had prepared it for him just like always.

"Thanks," Roland said to the empty couch.

"How do you know I'm here?" Nightingale said from the couch as she gradually revealed herself.

"You'll never sit if you get the chance to lie down." He smiled and then put the egg between the pancakes and raised it up to his mouth. "Besides, the couch was sinking where you are sitting. How could I not know?"

"No, I like sitting, too." She dashed to the desk and perched herself on the edge of it "Like sitting here," she added.

Roland would never get tired of seeing her graceful, airy movements, especially the amazing ones she made when she quickly stepped in and out of her Mist.

"You look good. Did you have any nice dreams?"

"Uh-huh, Indeed, I had a very a nice dream," she answered while raising her eyebrow a little.

"Good." Roland hurriedly ate his egg and pancake "hamburger" and continued, "Today, you ought to follow me."

"Because of the assassin?"

"Yes," he replied, "If Timothy gave orders to those on the gem list, perhaps there are still other assassins in the Western Region. However, it's impossible for us to check every single person." He felt it was a shame that people so brave and smart and so loyal to the royal family were employed as assassins. People as capable as they should be placed on more promising positions. With this in mind, Roland became even more resolute to eliminate Timothy's influence as soon as possible.

"As you wish, Your Highness." Nightingale said with a smile, "Where are we going?

"The mine and the salt well. That's one of the reasons I came to Stronghold."

...

Having summoned Petrov and other relevant personnel in the castle, the exploration group proceeded to the suburb of the city.

Roland actually cared more about the iron mines of the Maple Leaf and Wild Rose families, but he still made the gem mine his first stop on the investigative tour, given that gem trade was the primary industry of Longsong Stronghold, and the gem mine was the closest one.

The road leading to the mine became spongy and muddy because of the melting snow, making it impossible to access with a carriage. Therefore, the group rode horses and moved very carefully and slowly. It took them almost the whole morning to get to the edge of the Impassable Mountain Range. This experience strengthened Roland's belief in the saying that "a good road is an access to wealth". Without a hard-surfaced road to the mine, raising its output would be meaningless since any inclement weather could easily hamper transportation of the ore.

They went through a narrow passage and walked into the spacious mine cave, where the mineral vein lay. While 100 torches lined the cave, they could barely light the space inside it. Roland looked around and asked, "Is this a natural cave?"

"Yes, Your Highness." Petrov nodded and continued, "It was found by accident. It used to be a smooth rock wall, but about 300 years ago, it collapsed during an earthquake and revealed this cave."

At first, it was only used by local hunters taking shelter from the rain in the entrance, but eventually, they ventured deeper into the cave, and they found these colorful stones."

"You know its history very well," Roland said with a smile.

"These stories are known to every household in the Western Region." Petrov waved his hands to beckon to a man and introduced him to Roland. "This is Denver Crain, the manager of the mine. He will know much more than I about the details of the cave."

"You're Duke Ryan's man?"

"No, Your Highness. The Crains doesn't belong to any lord," replied the man called Denver. He looked as if he was in his early thirties, but he spoke like a composed older man. "We've lived near this mine for generations and my ancestor was one of the hunters who found this gem mine. We've worked for three Dukes, and the mine maps my family has drawn could be piled up to the height of a man. No one knows this place better than the Crains."

He was extremely confident with his knowledge of the mine as he spoke with ease and fluency even in front of a prince of the Kingdom of Graycastle. His sedate manner and black uniform reminded Roland of the stewards of aristocratic families in movies he had seen before.

Due to the fact that everyone had been checked by Nightingale, Roland knew this man was not a lurker. So he asked "Why is

nobody working here right now?"

"It's because the Months of Demons has just ended, Your Highness." Denver answered automatically, "The snow in the mountains will melt into water and flow down here. Even though we've built drainage ditches and pools to carry water through the mine, we can't take the water out as quickly as it flows in. As a result, we won't be able to get into the mine hole at the bottom. Based on our usual procedures, we have to wait until summer to resume normal mining."

"Are the iron mines in the territories of the Maple Leaf and Wild Rose families faced with the same situation now?"

"I've never been there, but I've heard that their iron mines are located in higher places, and their mine tunnels stretch upwards. I would guess that their situations may be better, but they'll still have to wait another month before they can mine in their pits."

"It seems that you may need several steam engines to draw the water out." Roland shrugged.

"Steam... engine, what's that?" Denver looked confused.

"A machine that enables you to continue your mining job in all seasons." answered the prince, smiling. "You have a lot to learn about mining."

Denver moved his lips a little in disbelief, but he was able to

restrain himself from refuting Roland's comment.

Roland did not notice Denver's expression. He thought it was only a matter of time for this mine to be equipped with tram roads, water-drawing steam engines, and a traction system similar to those widely used in the North Slope Mine of Border Town. They had already successfully sold out a set to a mining tycoon in Silver City. Only he had little interest in gems, so he would put his focus on the iron mines first.

"Okay, we're done here. Let's leave for the next stop now." Roland turned around.

"Wait, Your Highness. The Crains have a little gift for you." Denver, surprised by the prince's sudden decision, walked fast to catch up with him. He took out a small wooden box and handed it to him.

"Ah?" Roland took it with interest. He opened the box and saw two glittering gems inside, reflecting dazzling red and green beams in the light of torches. He was startled. "Th-they're multicolored stones?"

"Yes, Your Highness. They were picked from the highest quality gemstones and a treasure kept by my family for hundreds of years," said Denver, with a hand on his chest. "The Crains are honored to work for the new lord of the Western Region."

Roland was so attracted by the gems that he missed the latter half of the sentence. They looked very familiar, and even a layman in

mining like himself had heard their names.

They were called diaspores.

Chapter 494: New Resources

When diaspore reached the gem class, it gave off a dazzling light due to its high refractivity and was highly polychromatic. Unlike other gemstones, which changed from one color to another, it gave off many different colors at the same time, most noticeably red and green. It was obvious why locals called it the multicolored stone. Roland did not connect the stone to diaspore when Barov was introducing it, but he instantly recognized it when he saw it in person.

Also, when diaspore was dehydrated, it would turn into corundum and gem class corundums were the famous ruby and sapphire. Compared to the former, the latter was even more renowned.

However, it was not the gemstones themselves that excited him.

"What about the residue dug out from the mine?" the prince asked excitedly as he closed the wooden box after a long time.

"Are you asking about... the debris from digging the mine tunnels?"

"That's right, and not just rocks, but mud as well. How did you deal with them?"

"They were all carted out and dumped at the bottom of the mountain." Denver seemed confused about why the prince was interested in this. "Don't worry, Your Highness, all good quality

ores were carefully picked out and the remains were either broken in the mining process or of poor quality and can't be polished into gemstones. Moreover, the screening process is done by the most experienced members of my family. They never miss out good quality ores."

"You're wrong." Roland smiled and shook his head. "Those things you dumped... might be the real 'treasure'."

"What?" Denver froze in shock, and the other people also seemed confused. None of them could see the mine residue as treasure.

At the time, Roland find it hard to explain this to them, because in this world even steelmaking was difficult to imagine, let alone pure aluminum extraction.

Diaspore consisted mainly of aluminum oxide and was a by-product of bauxite and its discovery suggested that there was probably a large amount of aluminum in this area. That meant, the mud and rocks dumped by them could be used as raw materials for aluminum extraction. As the most abundant metal element in the earth, aluminum was more common than iron and could practically be found everywhere. Lucia could extract small amounts of aluminum from any rock on the ground, but it was clearly not efficient enough for industrial needs. Only places that were rich in aluminum were worth excavating.

This cave in front of him was one of those places.

Roland called Petrov aside and asked quietly, "How has the Crain

Family managed this gem mine in the past 200 years? I mean... how did the past lords pay them?"

"I checked Osmond Ryan's checkbooks, and the payment methods were simple. Every year, the Crain Family could choose a box of second-tier gemstones as their fee in a similar manner as weighing grain," explained Petrov. "This box is as long and wide as one hand and deep as half a hand, and as long as the cover could be closed, they could take as many gemstones as possible. Of course, the rarest gemstones had to be given to the lord."

"That means the two gemstones from their family treasure that he just gave me aren't of the best quality?"

"They really are the best in terms of quality, since he wouldn't dare to deceive you, but you know that gemstones are always more expensive when they're bigger."

"You've also accepted his gifts, correct?" Roland stared at the eldest son of the Honeysuckle Family with great interest.

"Um..." Petrov replied awkwardly, "Yes, Your Highness, I'll give them to you as soon as I get back."

"Keep them, I don't care," said the prince nonchalantly. "I'm just curious about how we can assure that this payment is accurate. What if the family secretly takes more gemstones during the excavation? Unless we turned their entire house upside down, we wouldn't be able to detect it."

"There're people monitoring the transport and filtering each cart of ore, and even if the Crain Family steals some, they wouldn't make it too obvious—this is a relationship of checks and balances, since the family is afraid of being punished by the lord, while the lord can't find other people who know the mine so well." Petrov paused. "Anyways, if we replace them with our own people, we still can't ensure that no one will steal."

"I see." Roland nodded. "Then let's continue with this practice. But besides the multicolored stones, I also want the rocks and mud that they dig up. When we get back, I'll draft an initial gathering plan for you to follow."

"Your Highness, is the mud... really more valuable than gemstones?"

"It depends on whose hands it falls into," replied the prince.

What's so important about aluminum? It has numerous uses. Having low density and lasting quality, it plays a vital role in the industrial production and is a crucial material used in aviation technology. To be honest, aluminum extraction is extremely difficult now, since the amount of electric power required by the electrolysis equipment is way beyond the capability of City of Neverwinter, but Lucia can offer another solution to this problem and may be able to extract some aluminum first with her ability. Then, weapons that are once impossible in this time period will become a possibility, such as large airships.

Roland originally planned to focus excavation on the two iron mines, but now it seemed that he had to adjust his plan.

...

When he returned to the castle after inspecting the two mines and a salt well, the sky was already pitch black.

After dinner, Roland excitedly took out a pen and paper and began drafting a utilization plan for the new resources.

First was the steam engine.

It would drastically increase the efficiency of the draining system in the mines, transportation and brine extraction in salt wells. As the Maple Leaf and Wild Rose families had fallen, he planned to relocate some experienced workers from the North Slope Mine and recruit more workers in the Longsong Area, in order for the two new iron mines to be operated first and their ores could be transported back to the Border Area for refining. Meanwhile, the gem mine's excavation would have to wait until Lucia got to Longsong Stronghold to determine the aluminum content in the mine.

The other focal point was the salt well.

As Roland had predicted, besides using the steam engine to drain water and increase production, he also lacked the vital step to refine the products into pure white salt. Since the mineral contents were quite complex, he decided to take a tube of brine from each well, take them back to the Border Area, and give them to Chief Alchemist Kyle Sichi to find out the specific refining process. After

the process was obtained, he could set up a factory on the spot to produce table salt on a large scale.

Of course, the salt industry would be managed exclusively by the City Hall, just like grains. The Elk and Honeysuckle families' salt wells could receive the City of Neverwinter's technological support, but the refined salt they produced must be sold to the City Hall at the set market price, not sold to other buyers in order to gain profit. If he could obtain large amounts of refined salt at a low price, he could undoubtedly create a new commercial path for the City of Neverwinter.

Roland believed that this could all become a reality after he defeated Timothy.

Chapter 495: On Top Of The Sealine

As the Charming Beauty slowly approached the harbor, Tilly walked out to see that the dock was filled with witches who had come to welcome her.

"Lady Tilly, you're finally back!" Molly rushed up to Tilly first with the help of the Magic Servant.

"Wow, how sneaky!" Honey complained.

"Yeah, where's Orbit? Open the door so we can go over too!" shouted Shadow.

"Stop it. My ability isn't for you to harass Lady Tilly!"

The crowd immediately erupted into a fit of laughter. Looking at everyone's genuine smiles, Tilly felt her worries from the past few days disappearing.

No matter what, this was her real home, a kingdom built by witches.

Camilla Dary greeted her on the dock. "You've gone for so long that I was even worried you wouldn't come back."

"No chance," Tilly said with a smile. "I just didn't expect the Months of Demons to last so long this time. How has Sleeping

Island been?"

"Of course, since you entrusted me with it, I wouldn't let you down," said Camilla with one hand on her chest. "The situation has improved overall. Using the Sleeping Spell was a good idea. I'll report the specifics to you later, but now... I'll hand you over to the witches." She blinked. "Otherwise they'll eat me alive."

As a great noble from King's City, Camilla was very skillful at managing things and played a key role in recruiting witches for Tilly. She was the reason why Tilly felt confident leaving the Fjords for a long time and investigating the Western Region.

Tilly shook her head helplessly, passed the Chief Butler of Sleeping Island, raised her hand to the crowd, and was heavily surrounded by a sea of witches.

"Your Highness, did you see your brother? How did he treat you?"

"I heard that the town also has a witch organization, so will they come and live with us?"

"Is it true that in that desolate little town, people don't have to worry about food and clothing, and they all live in new houses?"

"I'm so glad you're back. Everyone really missed you."

Tilly responded to their questions and concerns one by one until

Shavi flew onto the dock with a pile of books, and everyone directed their attention to these "priceless treasures".

"What're they?" someone asked curiously.

"Documents from ancient ruins?"

"They don't look like ancient documents. The pages are new, so they're probably legends."

"Or maybe they're play scripts? Honestly, I haven't seen a play for a long time."

"Um... but what should I do since I can't read?"

Tilly clapped her hands to silence everyone. "This is His Highness Roland Wimbledon's presents for you—they include reading and writing pamphlets, basic mathematics, and natural science! Simply put, these are full of knowledge!"

"Knowledge?"

Most of the witches looked confused, while Camilla and some other noble witches were surprised. "Do you actually want to spread knowledge to everyone?"

Tilly nodded. "This is the only way to improve our abilities."

Roland once mentioned that universal education was not easy to achieve and needed a great amount of money and time—when people put their jobs on hand to learn, it meant that the domain would temporarily lose some laborers. Also, encouraging them to study required the support of money, which, combined with teachers' salaries and the cost of building school houses, was not a small amount. Most importantly, it would not have instant profits like businesses and needed to be carried out in the long term by the ruler.

However, it brought profound changes, even more so for witches and normal people. Tilly had already witnessed this at Border Town. Before she went to the Western Region, she could never have dreamed that a group of commoners could have such vigor and vitality.

After returning to the keep, when she was about to arrange the plan for universal education according to Scroll's methods, Ashes knocked on the door. "Thunder wants to see you."

"Ah, it's been for a long time, Your Highness." Thunder smiled as widely and genuinely as usual. "How did it go? Did your trip to the Western Region address your confusion?"

"Honestly, I didn't get my answer." Tilly shook her head with a smile. "He was still reserved towards me. But in our current circumstances, these issues aren't so important for the moment... by the way, do you know about demons?"

"Monsters from hell?" asked Thunder, raising his eyebrows. "I've heard a lot about them in epics and legends, where brave knights

killed these terrifying enemies with spears dipped in dragon's blood."

"This time, they're no longer just enemies in books." She sighed.

"Um... what do you mean?"

"I don't know if those dragons exist, but demons... are real." Tilly briefly explained the Witch Union and Battle of Divine Will to him. "Where the Four Kingdoms settle on is used to be Barbarian Land, so if we lose again, humans will have nowhere to retreat."

"How could this be?" Thunder exclaimed after listening to her silently. "All the ruins in different locations are the works of witches, and an ancient witch from 400 years ago was discovered in Border Town? This, this is unbelievable! The mysteries you uncovered in one journey are more than I did in a lifetime!"

Tilly was shocked. "Aren't you afraid?"

"Afraid? Of course, I am..." he said excitedly, "but compared to the burning desire for exploration in my heart, this fear means nothing! Damn it, I wish I could go to the Kingdom of Graycastle to see this living fossil with my own eyes!"

Princess Tilly wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry—his motivation to go to the Western Region was to see Agatha instead of his own daughter. She did not know how to feel for Lightning.

"If not for my recent expedition, I'd probably have to give you the title of the greatest explorer of the Fjords," said Thunder after a fit of exclamations, "but... I also found something quite amazing."

"Please, go ahead."

"I sailed to the east of the Sealine again."

"Sealine?" asked Tilly confusedly. "What's that?"

"Ah, I forgot that you were still in Border Town the last time I returned." He stroked the back of his head. "It's a cliff made from seawater that splits the sea into two surfaces, but boats can still sail freely on it like... spiders climbing a wall."

"What? That's impossible!"

"I had the same reaction as you did the first time I saw it, but the Sealine does exist." said Thunder with great pride. "What's more incredible is that I sailed on the Courage over the Sealine and was lucky enough to witness the tide rise—you have to see it to believe how majestic it was. The flow of the sea water gradually quickens and eventually rushes downwards like falling off a cliff. If Molly's Magic Servant hadn't protected the boat, the Courage would have been snapped into two!"

"I turned the rudder to steer the bow directly towards the current, which formed a delicate balance with the wind. The Courage couldn't move forward, but also couldn't be brought down

the cliff by the current." He panted as if he were reliving the excitement. "Of course, the Sealine isn't a real cliff. We all know what a waterfall looks like, with water dropping straight down, splattering droplets everywhere and creating a loud rumbling sound—but there, there wasn't any of that except an accelerating current. I was sure that even if the Courage fell over the Sealine, it would have returned to the lower side, just like how it climbed up."

"What happened next?" asked Tilly impatiently.

"And then the Swirling Sea was filled—I could only clearly see this standing on the Sealine," said Thunder with a low voice. "By the name of Three Gods, I don't know how to describe my shock at that moment. The height of the Sealine shrunk from over 200 meters to about 100 meters as the sea below rose up. This is the reality behind tides!"

Chapter 496: Under the Deep Sea

"The water from the Sealine flows downward to cause the lower level water to rise? How is this possible?"

Tilly pondered for a while. "So when the tide falls, will the water flow backwards?"

"Good question." Thunder clenched his fists excitedly. "Afterwards, my fleet stayed near the Sealine for two weeks, until the tide fell. During that time, we tried all kinds of ways to break through the Sealine, and the most amazing part was sailing on the Sealine itself—do you know what kind of feeling that is? To outsiders, it seemed as if we were stuck to the face of a cliff, with our sails completely paralleling to the ocean, as if we could fall down at any second. But we couldn't feel this on the boat at all, and it was like the Courage was sailing in a narrow river, with the vast wall of seawater on one side, and the expansive sky on the other. Of course, we had to wait for the water to slow down to do this, otherwise even the Magic Servant couldn't protect the boat."

"This... makes no sense." Tilly felt her brain sink into total confusion. If some other explorer other than Thunder was telling her this, she would have immediately thought they were making it all up.

"I think so too, but I trust my own eyes more than common sense." He continued, "After two weeks, the tide began to fall—it happened at exactly the same time as the tides rose and fell in the Shadow Islands. The seawater did not regorge and simply backed off slowly, and the Sealine raised from about 100 meters to over

200 meters once again."

"Do you mean that all this seawater just disappeared into thin air?"

"Maybe, but it might have also flowed to somewhere else."

"Where could it flow to?" Tilly said, rubbing her forehead. "The tides are drastic in the Shadow Islands, much calmer in the Fjord Islands, basically nonexistent at the shores of the Four Kingdoms—if this isn't vanishing into thin air, what is it?"

Thunder pointed at the ground.

She sighed. "I remember that you once said the sea level in the Shadow area dropped very quickly as if there was a giant hole sucking it in at the bottom of the ocean. However, no matter how big the hole is, it should still be filled up after a few years."

"I'm only guessing. No one has actually seen what the ocean floor looks like... but I'm very curious about one thing."

"What?"

"Why is the ocean we're in called the Swirling Sea?"

Tilly felt her heart skip a beat as she came to a realization and shook her head, saying, "That's impossible and insane. If an

underground cave expelled water to create a whirlpool, how could we not notice it? Also, this name has been around for hundreds of years, so who knows what our ancestors were thinking?"

"That's right. I conducted a simple experiment and found that the water must be shallow enough for the whirlpool to show, but we don't have the ability to see the ocean floor." Thunder smiled. "Meanwhile, that doesn't mean that witches can't do it—I never thought of this before, but when you told me that witches ruled this land 400 years ago, I realized that this sea was probably named during that time."

"I'm a witch," said Tilly with a shrug, "and not a single witch on Sleeping Island can do it."

"I know who can."

"What?"

"The witch lives right on the Fjords but hasn't had any human contact for a long time..." Thunder sighed. "She used to be a close friend of one of my crew's best assistants, but after she awakened as a witch, she left the continent forever. Now, you can only hear her beautiful singing when mist sets on the sea. You've probably heard stories about her before."

"The mermaid that guides the ships... Are you talking about the subject of this legend?"

"That's right." Thunder nodded. "Although I don't know if she'll help me, it's still worth a try. I might need the help of my old friend Margaret."

"I see. Then you must hurry," said Tilly with a frown. "The merchants in the Fjords seem to want to hunt mermaids. A month ago, Sleeping Spell received several offers to capture mermaids. Honey sent me a carrier pigeon telling me the request, but I refused."

"Her songs are the symbol of peace and safety to the sailors and explorers in the Fjords. Those merchants are insane." Thunder asked quietly, "Can you tell me who they are?"

"Sleeping Spell shouldn't reveal the identities of its customers, but..." Tilly wrote a few names in the air with her hand. "You didn't hear it from me." Since she was also a witch, Tilly could not sit by and do nothing as the leader of Sleeping Island.

"That's right." He smiled. "They'll get what they deserve."

The two smiled at each other, and Thunder said, "I came to tell you about my new adventures. Besides, I want to ask you a favor."

"Go ahead."

"I heard that Crescent Moon Bay has a new kind of boat that isn't powered by wind and can sail much faster than sailboats. My sources told me that this kind of boat was produced in Border

Town," said Thunder. "If I want to keep exploring the Sealine, I'll need a much bigger and faster boat that can withstand the currents under strong winds." He handed her an envelope. "Money isn't an issue, as long as the boats are fast. Can you give him this order?"

Tilly understood his intentions. "You don't want Lightning to know?"

Thunder said helplessly, "If she finds out, she'll insist on going with me. There're too many unknowns in the Sealine, so it's too risky for me to take her."

"But she's already a great explorer. She was the one who found the stone tower ruins in the Misty Forest," Tilly thought. However, she still nodded. "I understand. I'll act as a temporary messenger between you and Roland Wimbledon."

"Thank you, Your Highness."

After Thunder left, Tilly pondered for a long time and took out the ancient books from the ruins in the Shadow Islands, hoping to find clues about the Sealine or tides. Following the method Agatha taught her, she twisted her magic power according to the shapes of the letters, and their meaning appeared in her mind. It was as if she wasn't reading, but the books were telling her their contents.

Some of the books recorded the writers' experiences in the Barbarian Land, some were sailors' diaries, and others mentioned important plans of the Union. The more she read, the more confused she became. These books had nothing to do with each

other, obviously not written by the same person. To her surprise, none of them mentioned anything about the Sealine, the spire under the sea, the telescope, or the Giant Stone Gates, totally different from what she expected. She thought that as long as she could read the Union's words, she could uncover some of the ruins' secrets, or even find the reason why the Shadow area's sea level rose so quickly. But now, she felt like she was piecing together random scribbles.

"Wait... piece together?" An idea popped into Tilly's head. She spread open three of the sailing diaries, placed them together, and checked them carefully. Their dates were far apart, some even decades apart, and their routes varied from the seas near the mainland to the Fjords. It was like someone had gathered all these things from different sources and placed them into the ruins.

At this thought, she felt a chill creep up her spine.

Who would do such a thing?

Chapter 497: A Chaotic Departure

The Longsong Area Harbor, City of Neverwinter.

Two concrete boats were docked as workers carried linen bags onto the shore, and the newly appointed officials in the Ministry of Agriculture counted them. The entire harbor was bustling with energy, which was a rare sight for Stronghold, a place still experiencing the aftermath of the Months of Demons. After being inspected and counted, the seeds in these bags would be distributed directly to every farmer.

"Your Highness, can the Golden Ones seeds really triple the wheat production?" Petrov was still a little skeptical. "Won't that mean that the produce could feed everyone in this city?"

Barov had said something similar to Roland before. To most of the noble, constant hunger was quite common among the civilians. "Feeding everyone is the basic responsibility of a lord. We're only taking the very first step. Also, it's not just because of my benevolence. Hungry subjects can't fully devote themselves to the construction of the city."

"But... this is no doubt an incredible accomplishment. I don't know of any other city in this kingdom that can achieve it."

"It's indeed an achievement, but I contributed very little to it. This is mostly the witches' work—without Leaf's modifications, there would be no Golden Ones."

Petrov was silent for a while. "Perhaps we really were wrong before."

"What do you mean?"

"We had the wrong attitude towards witches." Petrov sighed deeply. "Most of the nobles didn't care about the church's propaganda, but we still despised and distrusted the witches, so it wasn't hard for us to go along with the church's violence. Even if we used the witches, we treated them like slaves... Only Your Highness saw their true value and treated them like humans. This is the most incredible part—they really are special."

"Not only did you ignore the value of witches, but also ignore the power of the people, which is actually even stronger. Witches are like a catalyst and when they work together with the common people, there can be great improvements in civilization." However, Roland did not say his thoughts out loud. "We can still make up for the lost time. After all, we're all the same."

"Your Highness, the boiler is ready, and the Victory is set to sail," reported a guard.

"Tell everyone to board the boat. I'll be there shortly." The prince turned to Petrov. "The instruction team of the Ministry of Agriculture should arrive by this afternoon. They will show you how to plant the Golden Ones. As for the mine construction, population growth, universal education, and building factories, we've already discussed enough in the meeting. Just follow the plan and try to address any problems you run into by yourselves before asking me." He patted the eldest Honeysuckle son on the

shoulder. "I'm leaving this place in your hands. If you serve me well, you won't be just the executive officer of the Longsong Area forever."

"I won't let you down, Your Highness." Petrov bowed.

Roland boarded the concrete boat and ordered to set sail. Following the long sound of a horn, the Victory slowly left the shore and sailed towards the Border Area.

"How many Bald Boats are there already?" Joe clicked his tongue. "They're all coming from Border Town!"

"It's called the Border Area. Didn't our Lord say that we're all part of the same city as the town now?" Snaketooth twitched his mouth. Joe nicknamed the strange sail-less boats "Bald boat", but he preferred to call them Concrete Boats—their broad gray hulls looked like giant bedrocks, not even budging an inch as the movers ran around on them. "What's it called again?"

"City of Neverwinter," Tigerclaw chimed.

"Who cares? It has nothing to do with us." Joe exclaimed excitedly. "You're going to be taking this kind of boat to Border Town, right? Be sure to figure out why it can move without oars and what the white mist and black fog it spouts are!"

"This really has nothing to do with us," thought Snaketooth. "At least the city construction will give everyone a job."

"Are you really planning on leaving?" Sunflower seemed upset. "If you have to work as a handyman no matter where you go, why would you go to a foreign place?"

"Because we can earn one extra silver royal," said Tigerclaw, chuckling. "We can earn six silver royals if we stay here, but seven if we go there. If we can work on either place, we're obviously choosing the one with more money."

"I wasn't asking you." Sunflower rolled her eyes at him and turned her attention to Snaketooth.

For some reason, Snaketooth suddenly felt a little guilty. After the construction of the City of Neverwinter, the Lord kept his promise, and countless recruitment notices suddenly appeared in the square. However, the Rats had very few job options, which were mostly handymen and mason apprentices, and they were offered a lower salary than others. Of course, this was still better than their former lives, when they lived lack of food-if the salaries could really be distributed on time.

He told his friends that he was going to Border Town for the higher salary, but what he really wanted was to be closer to Paper. Faced with Sunflower's intense stare, he decided not to tell the truth and said, "My reasons... are the same as Tigerclaw's."

"Are you ever coming back?"

"Beep... Beep..." Suddenly, a siren began to wail at the harbor, and a red flag began to wave.

"It's our turn to leave, hurry!" Tigerclaw grabbed Snaketooth's hand and dragged him towards the harbor.

The crowd behind them also began to move as the siren rang. When they entered the security inspection area, Snaketooth felt as if he was being carried by the masses. He held his suitcase to his chest and kept staring back, but he couldn't see Sunflower or Joe over the dense waves of people.

A few officers in black uniforms were checking tickets at the end of the line. "What's your name? Assigned group? Take out your documentation!"

Snaketooth came immediately after Tigerclaw. He took out a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket and handed it carefully to the officer. "Snaketooth, Fifth Construction Team of Redflag Group..."

The officer ignored his introduction, scanned his ticket, and slapped it onto his chest. "Boat on the left. Next!"

Tigerclaw was already waiting for him at the entrance. "They didn't ask for bribes. That's amazing."

"Indeed... they didn't." Snaketooth half-heartedly folded his

documentation, put it in his pocket, and scanned the harbor for his friends.

When the Concrete Boat sounded its horn and slowly sailed away from the harbor, he finally saw them on a flight of stone steps—Sunflower was waving Joe's jacket, while Joe hugged his elbows and crouched behind her.

Snaketooth also took off his jacket and waved it furiously, ignoring other passengers' stares of confusion.

Their eyes finally met once again.

"Take care!" he shouted. His friends also seemed to say something, but the sound of the boat's engine drowned out their voices.

Sunflower followed the boat along the shore for a while, but the Concrete Boat was soon too far away and disappeared from her sight.

Even then, Snaketooth failed to give her his answer.

Chapter 498: The Roland Gunboat

It took Roland a whole day to return to the Border Area, and his back ached with weariness. After washing his face and brushing his teeth, he went to bed early, and he didn't feel refreshed until noon of the next day.

He thought, "I must have a soundproof cabin, a soft desk chair, and a large bed on my private boat. Otherwise, I'll have to sit on a trembling hard deck stool and listen to the roar of the steam engine, which will torture both my body and soul."

The first thing Roland did when he walked into his office was to call his director, Barov Mons, and Minister of Agriculture, Sirius Daly, to his office. Although there was only one week left before the planned date of the spring offensive, he could rest assured since Iron Axe was governing the military. The most important thing at the moment was to manage the agricultural production well, namely spring sowing. After all, he would be much less worried when he had a supply of grain.

"I saw seeds being transported at the Longsong Pier, so with enough Golden Ones, the crops there won't be too bad this year. But we should focus on the Border Area, since we're everyone's model, proof, and example!" Roland said with one hand knocking on his desk. "How is the spring sowing going? Someone tells me."

"Your Highness, here's the situation," Barov spoke first. "Among the first batch of promoted serfs, only 30% of them are willing to continue farming; plus the newly employed ones, the agricultural population is about 10,000. According to last year's average wheat

yield, the grain that these 10,000 serfs produce should be able to feed 40,000 to 50,000 people." He paused and then added, "And this number is calculated according to the official citizen's quota for purchasing grains, which is far more than the daily consumption of other cities' citizens. If we calculate according to the minimum amount of grain people need to stay alive, this number can increase by 20,000."

"That's about it, Your Highness," Sirius added. "But those conclusions are made by the Ministry of Agriculture according to the statistics from two years ago. This year, half of the serfs, mainly newly employed, will use the Golden Twos modified by Lady Leaf. Honestly, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed that one wheat straw could produce so many ears. Also, more than 2,000 serfs will change to planting potatoes and corn this year, which makes it hard to predict the actual yield for this year."

"As for the sowing process, farmlands are currently being plowed. According to the Crop Farming Brochure, farmland needs to be plowed three times, and raised compost must be mixed in the soil—usually, this process takes three to four weeks, depending on the number of laborers and the farm tools they're using. But the serfs employed last year all rented iron tools, which should greatly shorten the plowing time."

"As for the ditch depth and seeding distance, I've arranged apprentices to educate the serfs to farm with the optimal methods introduced on the farming brochure."

It was easy to see that the former knight of the Wolf Family had

done a lot of research on farming. He obviously had considered all aspects and made points that Roland could not help but agree with.

The excessive dependence on the land itself led to the agricultural underdevelopment in this era. Namely, people believed that owning land was all there was to farming. Sometimes, in order to protect the farmlands, they would let farmlands rest for a few years, which was very inefficient. Now that the City of Neverwinter had controllable water irrigation, natural fertilizer, and scientific planting methods, plus Leaf's modified seeds, the land yields greatly surprised all the residents. However, a third of the 30,000 total population was engaged in agricultural production, which was too high of a percentage for Roland. He wanted to efficiently reduce the agricultural population by improving farming tools, such as manufacturing agricultural equipment which used animal or mechanic power.

"Well, keep the momentum going," Roland said with satisfaction, "and people who have been assigned to the Longsong Area should keep everything well documented, in case we want to extend this model to other cities."

After dealing with agricultural affairs, Roland left the castle. Accompanied by Nightingale and the guards, he went to the dock of the Redwater River.

The ship, which was constructed by Anna, entered the weapons installation phase two days ago. Now, with its hull painted with a gray and red anti-corrosion coating, the ship quietly stood on the crossties. It was the size of about three concrete boats and seemed extremely mighty. Unlike the cement paddle steamer, which had

no cabin, this ship's side port was almost three meters wide and could fit the boiler and steam engine. There were also no paddle wheels on both sides. Another characteristic was a bridge at the center of the hull. Although the bridge was only about six meters tall, it looked very prominent.

Of course, as a shallow water gunboat, its most important equipment was its 152mm giant cannon. In order to save the manufacturing time, Roland did not let Anna produce the naval artillery, but tore down the one on the city wall and planned to install it on the ship.

Now, it was standing in the dock, waiting for hoisting—the final step.

"Your Highness." Anna waved at Roland when she saw him.
"Over here!"

The prince walked over with a smile on his face. "How is it? Is the construction going well?"

During his absence in Border Town, Anna took care of all the manufacturing work. Although she had all the blueprints of its key parts, it was entirely an unprecedented huge project, so it was natural to run into all sorts of problems.

"Not so well." Anna shook her head. "There were some tricky problems—side hull deformation, propeller leaking, hull tilting after being welded with a bridge, and the gun platform couldn't hold a cannon, but I solved all of them."

"All... solved?" Roland asked surprisedly.

"Yes." With a big smile, Anna explained while counting her fingers. "There was a hull deformation because the steel plate of the board was too thin, so I added fixed carriages. The propeller leak was caused by the gap between the casing and the gear lever, so I wrapped the gap with a sink so that the water inside won't run everywhere and can be pumped out by a steam engine. The bridge tilting was caused by uneven weights, which were fixed with a little modification. The gun platform problem was the most difficult one, but I drew inspiration from the revolver design—I first cut a row of indentations on the bottom ring, then I put in a falcula, which could be inserted in between gears, and it could simply fix the upper rotating gun carrier in any direction."

Roland blinked his eyes and spoke after a long pause. "You're a genius." For him, those problems were not difficult to deal with, but he had drawn countless mechanic sketches. Especially for the last problem, probably only someone as observative as Anna could associate a revolver with the fixing method of the gun platform.

"By the way, Your Highness, does the boat have a name?"

"Not yet," he said, raising his eyebrow, "and why do you ask?"

"The soldiers from the First Army came every few days and fought eagerly to carve their own names onto the bridge," Anna said with a smile. "They say you promised that the best gunner could have a gunboat named after him."

"Ah... I see." Rodney from the Artillery Battalion and Nelson from the Artillery Battalion came to Roland's mind. "But not for this ship, because the name of the first warship not only represents the ship itself but also represents its rank and model number." He tilted his mouth. "I can't hand over this honor to anyone else, so I'll name it the Roland—the Roland No. 1."

Chapter 499: Prelude To The Spring Offensive

Garden Mansion, the Inner City of King's City, Kingdom of Graycastle.

Since Roland Wimbledon's surprise attack on the palace which successfully destroyed the Hall of the Sky Dome, Theo's status had greatly improved. Every member of the "Dove and Cylinder" showed him great respect, and this intelligence organization was finally established.

Along with several core personnel, Theo could also affect Skeleton Fingers' decisions as a result of his contributions over the past six months. He also had a good knowledge of the activities of the other Rats' organizations, since he had informants in both the patrol team and the Black Street. They provided him with privileged information only for the money, and they did not care at all who they worked for. However, his gold royals still could not buy his way into the circle of the upper nobles, who cared more about family background and titles. Fortunately, through his connections with the heads of the Rats, who had close relationships with the great nobles, he managed to get some less important information now and then.

For example, he heard the news below.

"Timothy is sending a platoon of 500 men to block the Redwater River?" Theo tapped on the arm of his chair and asked. "Is he really going to do that?"

"Yes," Rockhill answered, "half of his platoon will be Blood Sail Rats. That's what the boss said himself. It's a profitable job, so the Rats fought each other over it, and several of them even got injured or killed."

"Indeed, it's profitable," Clown whistled and said. "Just think about it... What will they block in the river? The merchant ships! And what's the punishment for violating the king's ban? Confiscating the cargo and imposing a fine! Who can do a better blackmail job than Rats? Ah, of course... the patrol team is also good at it?"

"Half of them are Rats, so the other half must be Timothy's guards," said Hill Fawkes calmly. "I'm told that in the countryside this morning, there were four hawk-headed ships in the harbor."

Theo could not help but frown. The hawk-headed ships were high-speed, inland river warships that had slender hulls, with sails and oars, as well as embolons below the water and iron hooks on both sides. Once they caught up with their target, they could be tightly hooked together to enable the soldiers on one ship to easily jump onto another one to fight, making it difficult for merchant ships to escape from them.

"Based on all the information we've collected already, it's clear that Timothy is going to send a fleet of four warships carrying more than 500 people, including over 200 fully armed guards, to block the Redwater River." He sighed inwardly, thinking that it was really bad news.

They had got wind of Timothy's intention to block the Redwater River trade route before the Months of Demons, but most people did not take him seriously back then and thought he would only set a blockade in the canal of King's City. Nobody believed that he would dare to set a blockade between the Western and Central Region to declare an economic siege on the City of Neverwinter. That would anger the lords of Silver City and Redwater City, who would never allow this ban to cost them any great economic loss.

However, now with four warships that could easily block merchant ships anywhere they wanted, Timothy's situation was different, as the other lords could not compete with him at all on the water. Even though this blockade would turn the lords against him, nothing could shake his resolve to defeat Roland.

Theo looked at Hill, who nodded at him and voiced the same thoughts, "Timothy may not set a fixed blockade on the Redwater River. He'll just attack any caravan he spots, and his troops will act as pirates on water and bandits on land. An enemy force of 500 people is indeed a nightmare for any caravan. By doing so, he'll probably succeed in cutting off the Western Region's supplies."

"We have to report this to His Highness as soon as possible," Theo said in a deep voice.

Last year, Border Town had bought a large amount of grain, clothes and ore, and this year, because of the town's merger with Longsong Stronghold, it had a much higher demand for resources. If Timothy succeeded in his attempt, it would definitely cause Prince Roland massive trouble. They worried about this vexing issue for His Highness and wondered if he could solve this

problem.

Sounds of flapping wings then came from the backyard.

As Theo stood up to open the door to the backyard, a gray falcon flew in as quickly as a flash of lighting and gently landed on his shoulder.

The circus members simultaneously lowered their heads, putting their hands on their chests, to show respect for the message from the Western Region.

Theo took a piece of paper from the messenger and glanced at it. His heart skipped a beat.

"Ha... haha." He could not help himself from laughing out loud, even though he knew that he should hide his emotions as an intelligence officer. It was such timely, good news for him. "We don't need to worry about it anymore," he said with visible joy.

"His Highness already knows about it?" Hill asked.

"No, but he's going to solve it once and for all," he said in a low but excited voice.

"Once and for all?" Clown was confused. "You mean..."

"Yes, the First Army of His Highness has already left for King's

City!" Theo clenched his fists. "It's time to overthrow Timothy!"

He had known that His Highness would launch his attack this year, but he never expected it to happen so soon, as the prince had not told him any specifics about the attack in order to keep the plan secret. Now, he finally knew that the attack was actually scheduled for spring, just in time for the plowing season.

"It's finally time." Hill inhaled deeply, suddenly got down on one knee, and said, "Just give us His Highness's orders."

"For the new King!" the other five people shouted and kneeled likewise.

The thought of the new kingdom also excited Theo. If Timothy was overthrown, Roland Wimbledon would become the only successor to the throne of the Kingdom of Graycastle. And if Roland was crowned king, Theo would probably gain greater power and reach a new height that he had never dreamed of before.

He did not even have to think about their chances of winning. Anyone who had witnessed the First Army in action would never doubt that Roland would be victorious over Timothy in this attack.

"His Highness orders us to stay away from the west gate of King's City. He also orders us to prevent the Rats from taking advantage of the chaos during the attack, and to restore the social order as soon as possible after the war." Theo slowly read out the remaining part of the secret letter. "Do everything in your power to help the

civilians suffering in the war, such as providing medical aid, free shelter, and food, and hand over this job to the First Army when the situation is stable."

"Th-that's it?" All of them looked at each other and were totally at a loss. "His Highness didn't order us to trick the guards into opening the city gate, or set fires in different directions in order to mislead the enemy?"

"No, those're His Highness's wishes," Theo put the letter away and said with a smile. He thought it was just like Roland's style to care more about the people and social order, not to compel any intelligence personnel to step onto the battlefield. He felt that Roland's order also suggested that the prince thought nothing of Timothy's forces.

Chapter 500: Body of Steel (Part I)

...

Roland stood on the balcony on top of the command room of his boat and felt his heart stir with pride as he watched his fleet of boats lined up behind him.

Besides the flagship, the Roland, all the other boats were slow and clumsy concrete boats. However, with more than ten of them in a fleet, they still looked magnificent. The massive fleet puffed long trails of white smoke out of their chimneys and parted the river as they crashed through the waves, and they seemed to be completely unstoppable.

The gunboat was apparently the fleet's main attraction—its towering bridge and sleek appearance separated it from ordinary sailing ships and concrete boats. It dominated the inland rivers with its weapons, including a 152mm main cannon and two Mark I machine guns, custom-made high-pressure steam engine, and a propeller driving system that enabled it to reach a speed of 12 kilometers per hour.

"You seemed to be in a good mood." Nightingale observed as she tidied her windswept hair. "Is it because you'll be returning home soon?"

"You mean, the palace? No way, I'm never going back there," he said, shaking his head. "The Western Region is my real home. I'm happy because this conflict will be over soon."

"Hm... half of that is a lie."

Roland remembered with a shock that she could tell when people were lying. "Ahem, alright, I'm actually proud of myself for managing to produce many boats during the Months of Demons."

"You're telling the truth this time." Nightingale blinked. "But you sound a little full of yourself."

"That's why I lied."

"That's understandable." She chuckled and walked over to Roland. "I don't blame you. I wouldn't mind if you told a little lie, as long as it has nothing to do with me."

"... If you don't mind, then don't point out my lies," thought Roland querulously.

"By the way, I never thanked you," whispered Nightingale as she gazed into the distance.

"Thank me for what?"

"For ending the conflict and bringing peace to the Kingdom of Graycastle. Both commoners and witches will live happily under your rule," she said slowly. "I always knew that you'd achieve this, but I didn't think it'd happen so soon."

"It's not that fast. Even after I dethrone Timothy, the noble will resist with all their might. Uniting the entire Graycastle may take another few years." Roland sighed. "Progress is never easy, so we still have a long way to go in achieving our goal."

"This is already so much better than I imagined. Before this, I was worried I would never live to see this day."

"Come on, don't say like that?" Roland glared at her. "Do you think I'll put you in danger?"

"It's expected for a combat witch like me to always be in battle, and breaking convention takes sacrifice." Nightingale turned her head. "I had prepared for this the moment I swore my loyalty to you."

"I'm sorry I let you down," Roland said with a shrug. "There will definitely be sacrifices, but our enemies will be making them. Anyway, I should thank you."

"Why?" Nightingale asked in surprise.

"Because if I never met a witch, I wouldn't have the confidence to do what I'm doing now."

If not for Anna, he would not have decided to save these witches, and if there was not magic power in this world, he would still be cautiously living his primitive life in a run-down Border Town.

"You're... telling the truth." Nightingale looked up at him.

"Of course I am," said Roland with a smile.

Suddenly, a golden figure descended from the sky and landed next to them. "Your Highness, four sloops with paddles on both sides are approaching us from 20 kilometers away, and they look like the hawk-headed ships described in the report." said Lightning, "but I didn't see any hawk statues on the ships."

"The hawk head probably refers to the embolon under water." Roland patted her head. "Good job, keep up the good work."

"So... can I do less practice questions as punishment?" The little girl stared at the prince with begging eyes.

He could not help but laugh. "Alright. If you promise to keep still in the future, you only have to do one set of questions."

"Yes, Sir!" Lightning's eyes lit up, and she immediately leapt up and flew towards the East in a flash.

"You shouldn't have let her off so easy." Nightingale complained.

"She'll learn her lesson if she's rewarded." Roland dismissed her criticism with a wave and turned to walk towards the stairs. "Let's go back to the command room. We have work to do."

...

The small, square command room contained nothing but a wooden table and four benches. The commander of the First Army Iron Axe, the leader of the Gun Battalion Brian, the leader of the Artillery Battalion Van'er, and the captain of the Victory Cacusim stood by the table to draft the battle plan for their first battle in the river.

"According to Theo's report, Timothy's four battle ships are inland galleys. They're about as fast as our concrete boats, but they're more agile." Roland said, pointing to the chart on the table. "Usually, these ships will approach enemy ships, so their crews can jump onto them and fight. They can also be filled with flammables such as gunpowder or sulfur and crash into their target, destroying both ships. However, since our enemies' goal is to block the river and plunder our boats, they probably won't use the second method. "This is our first time to fight on a river, so please feel free to share any ideas you have."

"Your Highness, it'll be hard to hit a moving target with a moving cannon, so I suggest we fire when we're closer to their ships," suggested Van'er. "As long as we're about 50 meters away, I promise every cannonball will sink an enemy ship!"

"But I hear that firing shells not only wastes a lot of gunpowder, but also requires Miss Anna to make the shells," said Brian, shaking his head. "I think it's better to wait for the enemy to board our ships and then riddle them with the bullets from our heavy machine guns."

Roland turned to Cacusim and said, "What do you think?" He summoned this old man into the command room because he was the only person in the City of Neverwinter who had fought on boats before. According to him, he ran into pirates many times when he was a merchant, and even being plundered still counted as a kind of experience.

"Um, Your Highness..." Cacusim hesitated for a while. "In my opinion, we should just charge towards them."

"What?" the other two men all asked, staring in shock.

"Your ship is large, fast, and made of steel, so their wooden ships will probably collapse upon contact. Even if you don't destroy them, any leaks will prevent them from moving further." He glanced at everyone. "Of course, this, this is just my personal opinion."

This tactic reminded Roland of a poem that said, "With the sun shining and waves high, a D flag hangs from the mast."

"Alright, let's follow this plan." He finally decided. "Even though we don't have a D flag, a flag with a tower and four stars will have the same effect." "I order the Roland to raise the flag of City of Neverwinter, sound its horn, and proceed at full speed ahead!"